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THE IDES OF MARCH

BY

G. M. ROBINS

AUTHOR OF

"KEEP MY SECRET," "THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE," ETC.

NEW YORK

JOHN W. LOVELL COMPANY

150 WORTH STREET

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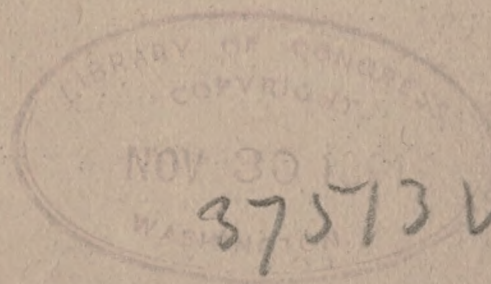
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THE IDES OF MARCH.

CHAPTER I.

HIS FATHER.

ABSOLUTE.—Sure, sir, this is not very reasonable, to summon my affections for a lady I know nothing of!

SIR ANTHONY.—I am sure, sir, 'tis more unreasonable in you to object to a lady you know nothing of!

FEVERELL CHASE, in all the comfort and solidity of its compact antiquity, nestled in its obscure position, rather too far below the brow of the hill, as modern sanitation would opine. At the base of its gardens, and clearly discernible from its windows, flowed the Bourne, a considerable tributary of the Severn.

This morning the waters were flashing and dimpling in all the radiance of a cloudless day; and formed a lovely prospect for the two people seated at the small, sunny breakfast-table in the window of the big hall.

There were four windows along this warm, south side of the hall. Three of them were tall, double lancet shafts, reaching almost to the vaulted ceiling with its fan tracery; and were blazoned with coloured glass coats of arms belonging to all those women who had married into the Westmorland family, so that the morning sunshine flung crimson, purple, emerald, and amber stains upon the black and white paving-stones, and the Indian rugs, and on the backs of the sleepy, basking dogs who were grouped about the floor in various attitudes of bliss. But the fourth window had

been cut down to the ground, so as to open on the terrace without; and the glass was clear, to give a full view of the lovely landscape which stretched away in the distance; and here it was that the present owners of the Chase loved to breakfast, since here they could read their papers in the sun, here there was plenty of room for unlimited dogs, whips, hats, sticks, and other male necessities; and here the butler did not wage war with pipes in the morning, and was prone to wink even at the presence of cigar-ash on the costly mats.

Both the persons now enjoying their trout and muffins, hot coffee, broiled ham and honey, were of the male sex. As a consequence, their breakfast-table was a silent one. One was deep in a newspaper, the other busy with a packet of letters which lay beside his plate. The only sound was the ticking of the great Dutch clock.

The two men were so curiously like each other, as to leave no doubt of their being father and son. There was the same rather peculiar type of feature, the swarthy skin and black hair contrasting noticeably with the clear eye of Irish grey and the delicate profile; but the points of difference were quite as striking as those of likeness; the pair might have been selected as a standing example of the manner in which a man's disposition may work upon and transform his outward appearance.

The face of the younger man was not exactly genial; the mouth was too serious, the lips too closely folded for that. The eye too, though candid enough, was not sparkling; there was no impulsiveness, no spontaneity in its expression. Passion was evidently not a leading characteristic, indomitable persistency would more likely be the ruling quality.

In a sense, the father was the handsomer; his features were better cut, his eyes larger, his lashes longer, but he lacked the air of spruce and compact manliness which his military training had given to Major Westmorland.

There was a certain air of effeminacy about the elder man. His hands were soft, he wore a velvet coat and a terra-cotta coloured neck-tie with a heavy gold ring. Something of the dilettante without doubt he affected ; and there were lines about his forehead which told of the irritability consequent on ill-health.

The Major, on the contrary, had a look of perfect physical soundness. His bronzed skin was clear, his chest broad, his expression tranquil. He was eating a good breakfast with evident appetite, while his father played with the contents of his plate, and threw large morsels to the dogs.

At last it seemed as though the young man's entire absorption in the contents of the post-bag became wearying to his companion. Laying aside the *Times*, he glanced across the table, and remarked,

"Indian letters, Evelyn, I see."

"Yes," said the Major, in a preoccupied voice.

"News evidently not satisfactory," said his father, in his incisive, slightly affected tones. "The fair Lily not coming to England?"

Evelyn Westmorland barely looked up, and replied indifferently.

"No, there's nothing about the Humes. This is from Disney."

"Disney?—Disney? Now what was it you were telling me about that young man the other day? Son of the Scotsdale Disneys, isn't he? I seem to connect his name with something in the nature of a romance."

"I told you, probably, that he had had the folly to get engaged to the reigning belle in Colombo, and likewise the honour of being jilted by her six weeks afterwards, eh?"

"I believe I recall the facts, and doubtless I expressed my utter contempt,—the contempt I invariably feel—for any man who has not the ability to gain and to keep the affection of any woman he sets his mind upon."

"Ah ! That's one of your theories, I know,"

returned his son, a little impatiently. "But it's nonsense, you see, pure nonsense. Very often the mere fact of knowing that a man cares for her is enough to prevent a woman from returning the compliment."

"Just so, but that does not touch my point. I still affirm what I affirmed before. The man, in the case you mention, goes to work the wrong way; he should not allow the woman to know he cares for her. Women never value what they are sure of. Before or after marriage, it is just the same. But I repeat—the man who cannot win the affection of any woman, or retain the entire devotion of his wife, is a contemptible fool."

"You should write an essay on marriage, the subject's fashionable."

"One day, perhaps," acquiesced Mr. Westmorland, leaning back in his chair with a smile. "And who was the Colombo belle who broke Disney's heart?"

"A Miss Merrion—girl of good family, I believe. He used to write and rave about her perfect manners, her gentleness, and all that stuff, you know. His letter—the one in which he announced his engagement—was a perfect ecstasy. 'The birthday of his life had come,' and all the rest of it. What are you smiling at?"

"Your phraseology, my son," smiled Mr. Westmorland, sipping his coffee. "'*All that stuff, you know! All the rest of it!*' You don't talk like a man in love."

"I am not in love," said Evelyn, shortly, "as everyone knows but yourself."

"Oh, don't mistake me. I know you are not really in love. You couldn't be. You are not capable of it. Not one man in a hundred is. But I think you are fond of Lily Hume. I hope you will marry her; and you will get on very well together, and neither of you discover, to the very end of your days, that you have missed the very core and root of life, the precious jewel which lies hid somewhere in this world's dirty slough, the treasure which, if found,

illuminates, upholds, atones for all failures, all losses,—love. But love is so much rarer than people think. It can be excellently well counterfeited, but the reality is rare. People think that love is a thing of which all are capable, like hearing, seeing, etc., There are people, as we know, born without sight or hearing, but they are not nearly so numerous as those born without the capacity for love.”

“You had certainly better begin that essay I suggested, without delay,” observed his son, wiping his raven black moustache carefully with his serviette, and leaning back in his chair. “I think the subject’s rather fatiguing for breakfast time, myself.”

“I wonder,” said Mr. Westmorland, studying him fixedly—“I wonder how it came about that I should have a son who has no imagination. It is a curious thing. Fate must have resented the passing of the estates to the younger branch of the family, in my person, and revenged herself by making my son as like my elder brother as possible. Poor Charles had no imagination.”

“Your remarks seem to me to be a trifle disconnected,” said the Major, breaking into another egg. “Must one be imaginative in order to love? Is that your theory?”

“Decidedly.”

“I’m inclined to think you are conspicuously wrong,” said Evelyn; “but there’s no need to discuss the point now. For my own part, taking a personal view of the subject, and apart, of course, from your wishes, I can tell you I don’t feel like falling in love. I have a thorough contempt for women! Look at this case! Here is poor Disney, as good a fellow as ever stepped, completely bowled over by this disgraceful jilt. He can settle to nothing, cares for nothing, finds the world dust and ashes, means to throw up his commission and come home to rot, as he elegantly expresses it. And all for the sake of this girl. I see no reason to consider her an exception to the rule: I believe all women are so, more or less—all attractive

women, that is. A woman will break faith just as often as she has the chance to, in my opinion. If she sticks to one man, it is because she has never been tempted to do otherwise, only that. Fancy pinning one's chances of happiness to that !”

His father pushed back his chair, took up a letter which lay beside his plate, and inserted a penknife into the envelope, carefully cutting the edge.

“ I tell you, every man can secure his happiness, if he only knows how to set about it,” he said with conviction. “ Look at me. I was a younger son. I had three hundred a year ; there were two good lives between me and the property ; yet I carried off an heiress from under an earl's nose, and for twenty years she worshipped me, happy if I smiled, dejected when I frowned.”

“ My mother was a saint,” burst out his son.

“ Oh no, Evelyn, she wasn't ; your mother was a woman,” gently returned his father, “ and she was a very unruly one when I met her first. But you see, I understood her : I understand all women ;” and the widower's countenance broadened into a very satisfied smile. “ For your own sake, I wish you took after me, dear boy,” he said.

Evelyn did not reply. He finished his egg, drank off his coffee, pushed back his chair, and rose.

The dogs promptly rose also.

Major Westmorland went to the open window, and stood looking out, his hands in his pockets.

Seven dogs also went to the window and looked at the view, and, had they possessed hands and pockets, would doubtless have imitated that manœuvre likewise ; but in their gentle canine minds they felt that human beings soared to heights they could not attain.

Their master passed out upon the sunny terrace, and strolled slowly to the left. The procession followed. The leader stopped, gazing into the sky for signs of weather. His seven satellites sniffed the air. Larrie, the Skye, was old and fat. He took advantage of the halt to be seated. The other six

looked calm disapproval, remaining erect, with stiffened backs, waiting for the next move.

When Evelyn had decided that the present brightness would hold, he returned leisurely to the window and looked in.

"Here's an invitation for us both to Hesselburgh," said his father, glancing at him over his pince-nez.

"Oh, is there? I'm not sure I wouldn't like to go," was the reply, in the truly British negative style of expressing a desire.

"Ah! yes! There is a daughter, is there not? I have not seen her since she was a child," said Mr. Westmorland, lifting his cold fine grey eyes to his son. "She would be a good match now."

There was a curious intentness in the scrutiny he bent upon the young man; but Evelyn declined to see it.

"Lily Hume and Muriel Saxon: I could hardly marry both," he said, with an air of wishing to turn the subject lightly aside, and an ill-assured smile.

"I tell you what it is, sir," returned his father slowly, with a gradual hardening of features and a complete change of voice and manner. "It seems to me that there has been enough of this fooling. You are running it too fine. You have only this autumn in which to settle yourself."

Major Westmorland stood stock-still, his dark face expressing an extreme distaste of the turn the conversation had taken.

"Let us talk of something else," he said.

A red spot glowed in the elder man's cheek.

"Will you never believe that I am in earnest?" he said, in a voice shaking with passion.

The Major's shrug of the shoulders was divided between annoyance and contempt.

"If I could think you in earnest, I should have to lower my idea of your mental powers considerably," he said drily.

His father's eyes gleamed with a cold, steelly light; his calm was more formidable than violence.

"You do me the honour to despise me because I am fool enough to accept as valid a testimony whose genuineness, I will undertake to say, is more conclusively proved than anything in the Old and New Testament. A fool! The folly, sir, rests with those who, in their insolent presumption, reject the warnings sent to them. We are so scientific nowadays, forsooth. We accept nothing that we cannot prove—anything that sounds unlikely is impossible; yet look how Fate has worked to bring about this remarkable coincidence—how this old prophecy speaks across the centuries, describing you, describing me, describing the very movements of the stars! Evelyn!" he rose, trembling, and laid an iron grip on his son's muscular arm. "Evelyn, when you put on that look of civil obstinacy, *I hate you!* Confound you, sir, you are like your mother! But I tamed her," the Major started convulsively, "and by——, I'll tame you! I say I will! If you refuse to gratify me in this, the one only request I have ever made to you, I'll swear I'll disherit you! Do you understand?"

"No threats are likely to convince me, father," said his son with dignity. "You ought to know that. Sit down now, let us talk this matter quietly over, for the hundredth time. It has been so long in abeyance now, that I thought—I hoped—the delusion had worn itself out. But it seems," wistfully, "that it's as strong as ever?"

The elder man took off his pince-nez, and began to polish them with a shaking hand, his eyes fixed on vacancy. His moment of anger seemed to have temporarily added ten years to his age, his cheeks looked hollow, his jaw dropped.

"Yes," he said, nervously, "of course it is as strong as ever! The time has come to talk plainly, once and for all. What I ask you to do is so simple, that you can be actuated by nothing but pure perversity in refusing me. Marry before the 1st of March next, and bring home your wife. Why, it seemed such an obvious thing. I have never insisted upon it! I

thought the surest way of securing what I wanted was to let you alone. I determined that I would not, like so many fools, defeat my own purpose by insisting too strongly upon it. Every man who can afford it marries before he comes to your age. I have always let you know I would make you a sufficient allowance. It is nothing in the world but sheer perversity that makes you decline."

Evelyn's face had a weary, patient look, as of one who has been forced many times to go over the same distasteful ground.

The starting veins in his father's forehead, the restless eye, the feverish aspect, suggested vividly enough the nature of the Westmorland family skeleton. He was a different being, utterly transformed from the handsome, lazy, elderly cynic, who had discussed the marriage question with his son over the breakfast-table.

"Come, stroll in the garden," said the son, soothingly, passing an arm through his. "Let us have a weed on the lawn, and talk this fairly out. There must be more in it. This old saw, this relic of mediæval superstition, is not enough to upset a man of your talent. A piece of rhyming jingle could hardly be of force to impress your mind so profoundly. Shake it off, sir. It embitters your life."

"Embitters my life? You are right there. It does—it does," said Mr. Westmorland, shivering. "I will put it only on that ground, if you choose. Consider the whole thing a delusion, if you must. But grant that my life is really embittered by your refusal to do so simple a thing as this I demand. Will you really still be obstinate?"

He sighed heavily as he stepped out into the garden.

Evelyn walked to one of the untidy tables, and took up the cloth cap which lay there among the whips and sticks.

The phalanx of dogs had, during the foregoing discussion, hung about in disconsolate uncertainty,

wondering how the situation would develop itself. Now they set up a glad howl of delight, and with no further ceremony rushed violently out of doors in a body, rolling over and over, yapping and playing, rioting in the exhilarating fragrance of the morning air. In the distance the misty woods which flanked the dancing river were in the meridian of their leafy splendours. Near by, the dew lay on the berberis and on the gorgeous geraniums and roses of the garden, the sun was drawing up the sweetness from the beds of mignonette. The scene was as soul-satisfying as an English summer knows how to be.

"So the 1st of March next is the fatal date?" said Evelyn, as he came forth, lighting his cigar.

"The 1st of March," said his father, mechanically, gazing before him with a fixed air.

"The Ides of March! It should be a fortnight later," laughed the Major, dropping his fusee and extinguishing it with his foot as he turned with a look of bored politeness to his companion.

CHAPTER II.

A GENERAL PRACTITIONER.

Pelting glee, as frank as rain
On cherry-blossoms.

E. B. BROWNING.

"My dear boy! I was on the point of bringing you up your breakfast in bed. Poor thing! You *do* look sleepy! You were up all night, were you not?"

"Superintending the arrival of Mrs. Jessop's twins," solemnly replied the doctor, as he sat down to the table and lifted the cover of the bacon dish.

The slim, impetuous girl who leaned against his chair gave a sympathetic moan.

"Oh, poor Dick!" she lamented, "poor Mrs. Jessop! Poor twins! I really haven't pity enough to go on any further, or I would add, poor *Mr.* Jessop!"

"I don't think the twins want pitying," said Dick, applying himself vigorously to the loaf. "They are both stout, well-to-do young people, of the male persuasion, and it's a jolly time of year for them to get acclimatised. Pour out my coffee, Leo."

The girl turned away to her place at the head of the little round table, sank into a chair, and complied with her brother's request.

"What does Mr. Jessop say?" she asked after a pause.

"Oh, he's rather pleased than otherwise. You see the other four are all girls. Twin boys are a novelty, and novelty is dear to the human heart. Throw me another lump of sugar, Leo,"

"My housekeeping will exceed my weekly allowance, if you consume sugar at this rate, Richard," said Miss Forde, severely.

"I expect so. Where's the paper, you young humbug?"

"I'm sitting on it," pleadingly.

"Then, however unwillingly, I'm afraid I must trouble you to rise."

"No, Dick, *dear*," persuasively, "don't read the paper yet. There's a letter for you," producing one mysteriously from under the tea-cosy. "It is such a nice one, and I do so want you to read it."

"How do you know it's a nice one, you naughty, inquisitive little girl?"

"Only by the look! It is a rough, thick, square envelope, bluey-grey. On it is printed 'Feverell Chase, Barnisham.' It looks as if it *might* be an invitation."

"Barnisham? It's from Westmorland! Give it up at once."

"Barnisham is *not* in Westmorland, Dick."

"Who said it was? It's the man's name. Hand it over, darling."

Leo reluctantly relinquished her "bluey-grey"

treasure, and remained, with elbows on the table, and frank chin supported in two pink hands, gazing straight at her brother in breathless interest, as he broke the seal of his letter and began to read eagerly.

"If it is an invitation, I wonder if it will include me," sighed she. "Everybody hereabouts knows that the doctor's sister has come to live with him; but Barnisham is nowhere *near* here. Feverell Chase! How nice it sounds!"

She gave an eager, impatient twist to the whole of her slim, long frame. Leo Forde was nineteen, with every one of life's possibilities before her. It was enchanting to find herself mistress of the doctor's unpretentious abode in the Cathedral town of Norchester. True, the neighbourhood was deadly dull, quite conspicuously without any charms of a social kind. But the tea-parties and tennis-parties, with their undue preponderance of her sex, and the subduing, chastening influence of the presence of the Minster clergy, were so many feasts of the gods, absolute saturnalia to Leo, who emerged from a nursery full of youthful cousins in a remote vicarage, the glad time having arrived when Dick, her darling Dick, her idol, the brother more than ten years older than herself, should be able to make a home for her.

Richard Forde was a man of more than average ability. He had been temporarily employed as doctor to a regiment whose own doctor was disabled, and in that capacity had so pleased the colonel that he received from him an introduction to the old doctor who had physicked most of Norchester for nearly fifty years, and was at last convinced that he must resign his practice. Richard became nominally his partner, virtually his successor, and at once sent for his little sister from the rustic seclusion of the vicarage schoolroom, to share his home as long as she cared to do so.

Mrs. Roper, his aunt, prophesied misfortune for this arrangement. She did not like to lose Leo, for

two reasons. First, the Ropers were poor, and would miss the allowance made them for her maintenance ; secondly, the girl had been unspeakably useful, her sweet temper and her quick wits making her both an able and a willing aide-de-camp to the harassed vicar's wife, with a large family and a large parish on her hands.

To the girl, the new life was like fairyland. She was as happy as the day was long. She went about in her plain frocks and linen shirts, from lawn to to lawn, tennis racquet in hand, and already the young ladies of Norchester were beginning to feel annoyed at the admiration she excited in this simple attire.

"My dear, how nice you look," many a kind-hearted host or hostess would say, as Leo walked fearlessly in, her complexion fair as a June rose, her dark dewy eyes sparkling with expected pleasure, her brown hair all fluffy, under its neat hat with fresh band of spotless ribbon.

It takes but little to adorn youth and happiness. Leo's untrimmed skirts and clean cottons would scarcely have harmonized with anything less young and blooming.

Her brother daily marvelled at the untold difference which the introduction of this "little chit" made in his life. A companion who invariably sees the funny side of everything is a boon the greatness of which is apt to be undervalued.

If Dick had been, perforce, absent from one of the garden-parties, Leo's account of it, when she returned, was better than to have been there himself. He was rather a silent man, but keenly appreciative. Leo kept him amused from the time her great eyes unclosed themselves in the sunny summer mornings, to the time when, like a tall, drooping poppy, she yawned herself, heavy-lidded, to bed.

"I had not been there five minutes," she would say, her recital rendered vivid by the laughing eyes, the expressive hand, the evident relish of the trivial incident "not five minutes before I saw Mrs. Hancock's

sprigged foulard walking up the path, with Mrs. Hancock panting inside it. 'There's Miss Forde!' she gasped, as I knew she would. 'Come and shake hands, my dear. What's your Christian name?' Now, Dick, you know it is a little fatiguing, dear. This was the ninth time she had asked me that. I felt so tempted to invent a new one and call myself Jemima, just for *once*, to see what she would say. However, I'm so truthful by nature that out it came. 'Leo,' I said sweetly. 'Leo! That's a boy's name!' Stereotyped objection! 'It must be Leonora!' 'No, I assure you my full name is Leone!' 'Leone! There is no such name. It's Leonora, you may be sure. Your father and mother would never have given you such an extraordinary name as Leone!' 'I am sure they would not, had they known how it would distress you, Mrs. Hancock.'"

"Leo, you never said that!"

"But indeed I did! She goaded me up so! She looked at me so vindictively. There was a fat man with a beard behind her, I believe he is her son, and that she meant to introduce me, but she refrained, to punish me, and swept on, and divided him between Etta Nash and the two Miss Petties. Wasn't it tragic? I was left to mourn in a corner for nearly five minutes, when Captain Rider came up and asked me to play, and I drowned my disappointment in three splendid sets, in two of which we beat the Precentor and Georgie Glynn. The fat man cast some longing looks in our direction, but he was helpless, for he was got up in his Sunday best, and I don't think he knows one end of a racquet from the other!"

Recitals, such as this, amused Richard greatly. He was intimately acquainted with Mrs. Hancock, and the sprigged foulard, and was glad that his Leo did not elect to be patronised by her. He did not reflect that the girl's acute sense of humour might be dangerous in a place where every one took everything seriously.

Nobody in Norchester, except Leo herself, found Mrs. Hancock at all laughable.

Richard had perused and re-perused his "bluey-grey" letter with knitted brows, that betokened rather puzzled thoughtfulness. His sister grew more and more impatient.

"Oh, Dick," she burst out at last, in uncontrollable eagerness. "*Do* tell me! You are just keeping quiet on purpose to tease me! *Is* it an invitation?"

"Oh, yes," said Dick, drily, "it's an invitation, certainly."

"For what? For whom? For me?" she cried.

"For himself, to lunch here to-day," said the doctor, replacing the letter in its envelope.

"Is that all?"

How inadequate are words to render the absolute blankness of Miss Forde's tones!

"Who is he?" she presently asked, after an interval, during which she armed herself with fortitude.

"He is Major Westmorland. He was in Colonel Barff's regiment; and he's staying at Hesselburgh."

"Staying at Hesselburgh! With the Saxons?"

"So he says."

Here was food for much thought. The Saxons had just come down in their might from London, for the summer season, at their country house. Mrs. Saxon belonged to the great plutocracy of to-day; she was the presiding genius. Sole daughter and heiress of Melliship, the well-known provision merchant, she had married, nobody quite knew why, Mr. Saxon, an amiable and harmless little gentleman of good family. It could scarcely have been *faute de mieux*, for Mrs. Saxon, spite of personal disadvantages, had a fortune which could have easily secured her a very creditable position in the peerage. Perhaps she recognised, in his peculiarly malleable temperament, the one indispensable requisite for her happiness. It was always "Mrs. Saxon and her husband were there." She was a large, stout woman, with a heavy jaw, and

red hair, which she wore cropped as short as a boy's.

It was rumoured that she was to remain all the autumn at Hesselburgh this year, as she was burning to introduce the sleepy Cathedral town to some of the modern applications of hygienic science. In fact, the mystic word Demography had been whispered in Norchester. Mr. Saxon had to follow his leader through many strange paths, for Mrs. Saxon was an inveterate hobby-horse rider. Whether it was Hygiene, Female Suffrage, Massage, Home Rule, or the Housing of the Poor, whether Mrs. Saxon deemed it necessary to lay foundation-stones, go to a gymnasium, or support some sister enthusiast on a public platform—there likewise was to be found the ever-patient Mr. Saxon, with his double eye-glass and his unfailing sweet-temper. He was a good-hearted little man, and there seemed no cause to believe that he was unhappy, though those of Norchester society, who were not invited to Hesselburgh, gave it as their opinion that the Saxon idea of matrimony was not theirs, thank heaven!

On the other hand, those admitted to any sort of intimacy at Hesselburgh, while frankly avowing the eccentricities of its ruler, still held her to be a woman of exceptional ability, who could scarcely be expected to move quietly along the beaten track prescribed for her by conventionality. Anyway, be her vagaries what they might, nobody could deny that she was a good wife and mother; that the poor on her estates were excellently cared for, or that she was regular in her place in the Minster on Sunday mornings, especially when the eloquent, if somewhat unorthodox, bishop happened to be preaching.

Leo Forde had beheld her last Sunday morning with much interest, as she marched in, arrayed in a billy-cock hat and tailor-made light cloth gown, no mantle of any sort shrouding her big, uncompromising proportions, and her red hair cut shorter than her husband's mouse-coloured locks.

She was followed by her pretty daughter Muriel,

quite unlike her mother in every detail, by the ever-faithful partner of her progresses, and by a tall boy of nineteen, her son, whose appearance most favourably impressed the doctor's little sister.

Spite of the oddity of at least one member of the family, she thought she would like to know the Saxons. They seemed unlike the rest of the Norchester community—they looked as though they had some “go” in them.

For this reason, the thought of receiving their guest, Major Westmorland, to lunch, caused her some trepidation. She was already mentally selecting her *menu*, when Dick, the letter in his hand, left the room in a preoccupied sort of way, and made for his little surgery. He had not offered to show his correspondence to his sister, so she wisely concluded that it was “about business,” and, ringing the bell, prepared to consult her cook as to the resources of the larder.

In the surgery, Dick Forde sat down by the table, took out his letter and read it carefully through again.

It ran thus :

“Feverell Chase,
“August 2nd.

“DEAR FORDE,

“I am a good deal disturbed, and in the midst of my disquietude I have remembered, with a ray of hope, that your new practice is at Norchester, not five miles from Hesselburgh, where my father and I are just going to stay some weeks with the Saxons. I wonder if you remember a great discussion down at Woolford, at the officers' mess, about mania, and that I told you that my father was the victim of a most curious form of monomania ?

“In case you do not remember, as is doubtless most probable, I will tell you again what I told you then. I am afraid I shall have to bore you with a short *resumé* of family history, in order to make my meaning clear. With which object, I shall leave my father to drive up from the station to Hesselburgh alone, and waylay you—it will be about lunch-time

—to pour out my troubles, if you can listen to them, then ; if not, to make an appointment for some day in the near future. If you are obliged to be out, leave a line for me, will you ? And so make me still more than at present,

“Sincerely yours,

“EVELYN C. WESTMORLAND.”

CHAPTER III.

HOPE.

We live by admiration, hope, and love !

The Excursion.

THAT same morning, while still Dr. Forde was slumbering in his bed, and Leo herself only just thinking of turning out ; while the lovely countryside was still swathed in a pearly mist, with the sunshine sparkling through, and all the pastures were drenched with a copious dew, two mysterious forms were to be seen, creeping with baskets through the silent park at Hesselburgh, eyes fixed upon the wet grass, as though searching for hidden treasure.

A youth and a maiden.

The youth was a lanky specimen of his kind—long, thin, dark, and humorously plain, though a fund of good spirits sparkled in his brown eyes, which atoned for many deficiencies. He wore gaiters, to protect his feet and ankles from being saturated in the long rank grass, and his expression, as he walked at his companion's side, was that of one thoroughly enjoying himself. The maiden wore a stout covert coat over her serge gown, and a little straw boating hat set on her brown hair. Her skirts were looped up as high as decency could possibly permit, and her shapely ankles were cased in high, well-laced boots.

Her face can only be described as one which, if glanced at for a moment, perforce made you turn and look again.

Warm brown hair with a ripple in it, clear hazel eyes, a fair and delicate skin deepening into a soft carnation on the smooth cheeks, a nondescript nose, short, even teeth, and a figure neither tall nor short, and erring on the side of slenderness—these are the property of many and many an English girl.

This particular one possessed something more. A certain sedateness of expression, at once sweet and baffling, assailed the curious with a vehement desire to know what her character was. Instinctively people turned aside to notice her, and talk to her : with this astonishing result ;—they discovered by slow degrees that the demure girl with the sphinx-like expression had found out already a great deal more of them than they had of her.

She was, or seemed to be, inscrutable.

Just now, however, the natural reserve was as much laid aside as possible ; she was yielding herself up to the unconventional delights of the moment, to the seductions of wet grass, thick boots, and a solitary park at half-past six o'clock in the morning.

"Tom ! oh, Tom !" she cried, rapturously, "here they are at last ! A perfect settlement of them, such beauties ! Do be quick !"

Tom Saxon, who had turned unwisely aside after glimmering white dots, which turned out to be puff-balls, now swooped with a shout on the girl's treasure-trove. Unmistakable mushrooms these, freshly sprung, firm, fleshy, and embrowned like a lightly-baked biscuit at the top, with the dew upon them, and the fresh earthy fragrance clinging to them, and to their captor's pink fingers as she laid them delicately in her basket.

"Oh, Tom, are they not good ones ? Don't they make you feel quite hungry for breakfast ?"

"Rather ! If we go on at this rate we shall be in plenty of time to get them cooked for breakfast,

And we'll tell cookie to stew them in cream. I say, Hope! let's have tea in the kitchen again to-night. And have another bird cooked in mushrooms! Muriel will, like a shot. She's game to *eat* the mushrooms, though she won't take the trouble to get them for herself."

"Trouble! Fancy calling this trouble!" said Hope as she rose from her crouching posture, and faced the sunrise with a half smile lingering in her dreamy eyes. "Tom, I do wish you were poetical."

"So do I, my dear, I'm sure, if it would give you the smallest pleasure. But you see I'm not."

"No, you are not," she acquiesced, with a reluctant sigh. "However, you are a very nice boy as you are, so I won't repine."

"What's the good of spouting a lot of rot?" blurted Tom, somewhat spasmodically, the upper part of his body being stretched over a ditch, and his face reddened with his exertions. "Here's a ripping good morning and a first-class sunrise, and these mushrooms take the cake, I'm blessed if they don't! Look at that one. Here am I, out in the park, with the jolliest girl in England, and such a rousing dew on, that I shall tell them to roll the tennis-lawn before breakfast. I don't want any poet to express my feelings, thank you! Nobody could do it neater than I've done."

"Oh, Tom!" cried Hope, sorrowfully shaking her head at him. "Oh, Tom, does *no* upbraiding voice within you cry 'For shame!' You that learned Shakespeare in your cradle. You who have studied Paradise Lost as a holiday task! You whose mother reared you in a perfect hot-house of literature——"

"Just so. That's precisely why," said Tom, composedly, regaining his balance, and straightening himself, basket in hand. "I might have taken to it later if the good old *mater* hadn't put it into me with a spoon. It's the same with everything. You take a boy twice a day to church regularly, and see if he ever wants to go inside a church again when he's

grown up. It's the nature of the animal. When I'm talking to the *mater* I put it better. I say the natural reaction of humanity, asserting its power of freewill against the animal instinct of imitation. I think," said Tom, with pardonable pride, "that that sounds rather well, don't you, duckie?"

"Very," murmured Hope, reflectively. "Quite like Herbert Spencer: or is it *unlike* him? I'm not quite sure; but I know he says you ought to let children alone, doesn't he?"

"Never mind him. Let's have tea in the kitchen," said Tom, persuasively. "Here's a jolly, long, lovely summer's day before us. Let's play tennis after breakfast, be lazy after lunch, have tea and mushrooms at four, and then go for a good long ride. Eh? Shan't we?"

"Oh, Tom, you forget!" said Hope, with a sudden unpleasant recollection. "Are there not visitors coming to-day?"

"By Jove! So there are! The Westmorlands, *père et fils*! French, do you observe? Just thrown in to show my culture. Oh, blow the Westmorlands! They will cut up the whole day! They will have to be met. Oh, well, *pater* can do that,—can't he?"

"Are they nice—the Westmorlands?" asked Hope, a little doubtfully, as she re-arranged her spoils in her full basket.

"Westmorland *père* is a great bore, in my humble opinion; but the *mater* and he are tremendous chums. She never buys a picture without consulting him; and he presents her with copies of his poems, bound in white vellum and printed for private circulation only. The worst of it is, they will stay such a time, as I know the *mater* has invited him specially to help her in her plans for this blooming Sanitary League. He's an old humbug, that's what he is. I don't think the Major has a very good time of it, myself. They had me down to Feverell Chase for a week's shooting last year, and I can tell you I wouldn't be in his shoes. The old boy is always snubbing him. And he talks

so queerly too, about will-power and occult forces and telegraphy, and psychology. He takes the *mater*, when we are in town, to séances and things. I think he's a bit cracked, myself."

"Is Major Westmorland patient with him?" asked the girl thoughtfully.

"Wonderfully, as I think. He's not a bad sort, only a little heavy. Not up to much fun. I wish they weren't coming, for my part. You won't let the old boy monopolize you, will you, dear?"

"Will he want to?"

"Oh, yes, won't he? I know him. He makes love to every girl he meets on the Major's behalf. It's such fun, because you know the Major doesn't see it. He's the sort of fellow that won't marry."

"I suppose, as he is the only son, his father is anxious for him to do so?"

"I suppose so. He'd much better let it alone, or else it will be like what we were just now talking of—he won't marry, out of sheer perverseness."

"That would be tragic," laughed Hope, lightly. "Oh, Tom, there's the stable clock chiming eight, and I must change all my things before breakfast! We must run!"

The sleepy chimes of the great clock died away on the hazy air, and through the stillness boomed out the heavy strokes of the distant Minster bell.

A nameless, causeless, depression had suddenly assailed Hope. The morning was fair as ever, the mushrooming expedition had been most successful, and a long summer's day was before her. Why should she feel sad? Why should she find herself strenuously wishing that no guests were to arrive at Hesselburgh that day?

If only she and Tom and Muriel could continue the placid, childish, unruffled existence of this past week. She had been able entirely to forget that she was nearing the mature age of three-and-twenty, that she had seen much society and been half round the world; that joy and disappointment, pain and pleasure of a

keen sort had been hers. This wholesome English country life, this natural unspoilt English boy, with his queer, outspoken worship of her and his vivid interest in such rustic joys as mushrooming, or tea in the kitchen, were making her young and unsophisticated again, she told herself.

It was pleasant—refreshing—nice! How nice! Now something was going to break in upon it unpleasantly, she dimly felt. An alien presence was to be introduced. If Major Westmorland were anything approaching young, Muriel and Tom and she could scarcely exclude him from their plans; but she felt that the presence of an outsider—a man—not a boy like Tom, but a society man, would chill, repress, subdue. It was a saddening thought, and it just dashed the exhilaration of that dewy ramble, that sumptuous sunrise, these satisfactory spoils.

Tom was in such jubilant spirits that he forgot to notice her sudden silence. The arrival of twenty Westmorland families could not depress him. He had duly warned Hope against the father, he certainly feared no interference from the son. He was in tip-top form, as he announced to his mother, dancing in to breakfast with a most formidable appetite.

Mrs. Saxon, in a white cotton gown, was seated already at the table, with a book at her side, eating her breakfast calmly, and reading at the same time. Her short red hair was brushed back sprucely from her large, bony brow, as high as that of a mediæval Flemish madonna. She looked, as a friend of hers once remarked, aggressively clean. She appeared to have more than washed—to have *scoured* herself all over. One felt as if she had used the garden rake, and the irritation caused by this treatment had not yet subsided. She heartily returned Tom's hearty kiss and avowed that she had still a corner left for the mushrooms, which presently arrived, hot and savoury, from the kitchen. Mr. Saxon, at his end of the table, smiled, and greeted his son with the

unfailing amiability with which he greeted everybody.

Hope speedily appeared, metamorphosed completely as to costume, and quite restored as to her spirits.

"Muriel last as usual," said the hostess, good-humouredly.

"I've a great mind to go and cold-pig her, lazy little beggar!" cried Tom, indignantly. "Why, Hope, and I have been up for hours! Fancy wasting a day like this."

"I wonder if you would do something for me to-day, Tom," requested his mother. "I want you to take the dog-cart into Norchester for some things I must have; I can't well send the men, as the brougham must go to the station to meet the Westmorlands, who will be here to lunch."

Tom's face fell. His planned tennis morning vanished into thin air. He was far too sweet-tempered, however, to demur.

"I'll go," he announced, heroically, "if Hope will go too."

"Of course I will. I like going in the cart—you know I do," said Hope.

"You might meet the 12.53 as you come back," suggested Mrs. Saxon. "I am going down in the brougham, and the Major would probably rather drive up in the cart than make a third with his father and me. We are sure to talk as if we were at a W. S. L. committee meeting, for Mr. Westmorland is coming especially to help me in the arrangements for the Health Fête."

"Blow the Major," said Tom irreverently.

"Don't be foolish, my dear boy," returned his mother calmly.

"Well, he won't be much in our way, Hope: he can sit behind with Muriel, can't he?"

"Oh, can he? That depends on who 'he' may be," said the calm voice of Muriel herself, as she sauntered in to breakfast.

"Major Westmorland. He's coming to-day, worse luck to him!" grumbled Tom.

"Why, I always thought you liked him," said Muriel in some surprise, as she seated herself at the table.

She was decidedly pretty, this Muriel, tall and fair, and rather languid in her movements, always faultlessly dressed, invariably too late for everything, but never ruffled by any amount of banter or remonstrance.

"I am sure you used to like the Major very much," she said, in a soft, high-pitched, drawling voice, which was characteristic of her.

"Well, his father's an old bore anyhow," said Tom crossly.

"I quite agree with you there," said Muriel serenely, helping herself to butter, her heavy white lids almost eclipsing her soft eyes. "I think anybody but *mater* would find old Mr. Westmorland a bore. He is always talking about German, or classical music, or Browning, or Hygiene, or something else equally disagreeable."

Poor Mrs. Saxon! Here was her reward for the unheard-of sums lavished on the education of her son and daughter. As Tom said, it had been put into them with a spoon. There was some truth in his theory of reaction.

The *mater* took the candid criticisms of her family in very good part. Evidently the right of private judgment was freely conceded at Hesselburgh. She merely observed, as she gathered up her letters and rose from the breakfast-table, that they had better practise resignation, as the visitors would most certainly stay for a month, and that the dog-cart would be round by eleven.

CHAPTER IV.

LEO AS HOSTESS.

The primrose by the river's brim,
A yellow primrose was to him,
And it was nothing more!

PETER BELL.

MAJOR WESTMORLAND, as he came out of the station, a goodly array of his father's impedimenta on his arm, was half dazzled by the flood of brilliant sunlight which poured over the scene. Looking about, he soon perceived the Saxon brougham, with its neat liveries and sleek horses; and proceeded, with the aid of the footman to stow his packages within it. His father was still on the platform, shaking hands with his hostess, an operation never to be got over in less than five minutes.

"Hi!" shouted some one close by. The Major looked up involuntarily, with knitted brows and dazzled eyes.

"Hi!" came the cry again, accompanied by a lively chirrup. "Hi, Major! Look alive!"

"It's Mr. Thomas, sir, and the young ladies in the cart," explained the footman; and Evelyn, shading his eyes with his hand, became aware of the close proximity of the graceful cart, its varnished wheels flashing in the sun; of a restless mare dancing up and down, in her nervous dread of the puffing engine, only divided from her by a wooden rail; and of the faces of three young people all turned towards him, with expressions of varying interest.

It struck even the preoccupied, unimpressible Major at first glance, what a brilliant trio they were. Tom's plainness was more than atoned for by his

spirit and gracefulness ; and both the girls, young, pretty, becomingly dressed, their dainty parasols just fluttering in the morning air, were a pleasing example of English country life in summer-time, at its very best.

Youth, promise, and enjoyment ! It was a charming picture. He made his way up to them, raising his hat indefinitely to both girls, being somewhat exercised in his mind as to which was Miss Saxon. Muriel relieved him of his doubts, by leaning forward and greeting him in her peaceful treble drawl.

"How do you do ? Have you had a comfortable journey ? Was not it very hot in the train ? I should think it must have been."

"Awful !" he answered briefly, with a short laugh, which Hope thought sounded rather pleasant.

"We thought you might prefer driving up with us to going in the brougham with *mater* and all the parcels," went on Miss Saxon.

"Thanks very much——"

"And we've got no end of sweets, so I advise you to come," cut in Tom, cheerfully. "Not half a bad tuck-shop in the Market Place. I say, Muriel, introduce Hope, hadn't you better?"

"Major Westmorland, may I introduce you to my friend Miss——"

The mare jumped, the wheels grated on the gravel, and the name did not reach the gentleman's ears. He bowed in acknowledgment, and for a moment met Hope's unruffled gaze, as she calmly looked down from her superior height. She gave him a little smile, and said, rather pleadingly :

"I will be so grateful if you will straightway jump in, Major Westmorland, it makes me so nervous when Maidenhair dances about like this."

He was obliged to explain, rather lamely, that he was not coming straight up to the house, he was due to lunch with a friend of his, whom he had to consult on a matter of business. He almost felt as if he did not wish to get up and drive with these three

jovial creatures, who ate sweets and "chaffed" and amused themselves so gaily. He was not in a vein for mirth of this kind, his mind was full of a settled grievance, which he hoped to have the relief of pouring into a sympathising ear shortly. But he was not so easily to be rid of the dog-cart and its mirthful occupants.

"Who's your friend, and where does he hang out?" demanded Tom, with the Saxon ready good-humour.

"Hop in and we'll drive you there——"

"It will be so much out of your way, Saxon——"

"So much the better. Just look at Maidenhair! She's full of corn and wants taking down a peg. Where shall I drive?"

The Major resigned himself to the inevitable, with a look of evident distaste, which tickled Hope amazingly. He took his seat behind, by Muriel's side, and turned to his charioteer.

"It's Dr. Forde, in Minster-gate," he said, mournfully.

"Oh, oh! Dr. Forde in Minster-gate!" cried the irrepressible Tom, in tones of much—far too much—meaning. "No wonder you are so anxious to call there, Major—no wonder! Well, look here! I'll make a bargain. If I drive you there to-day will you take me to call and introduce me first chance you get? Eh? Isn't that fair?"

"Tom, how vulgar you are," said Muriel, unemotionally.

"Not a bit of it; you know quite well that, not counting Hope, there's not a girl in Norchester who comes anywhere near Miss Forde. I saw her last Sunday in the cathedral. Give her my love, Major, won't you?"

No reply was vouchsafed to this broad, schoolboy chaff; evidently Major Westmorland did not by any means relish it. They were off now, shooting over the long bridge, across the wide, shallow, vociferous river, washing against the stone piers. Then onwards, along the irregular main street, the low, grey

towers of the Minster now visible, now hidden by intervening buildings.

Through the wide market-place ; empty to-day, except of the immemorial market-cross in the centre ; past the town-hall, club and reading-room, through the windows of which a few idle men watched, with languid interest, the second invasion of the Hesselburgh dog-cart that morning ; and so down Minster-gate, the narrow, precipitous alley which formed the chief approach to the cathedral.

Here were several good houses of the old-fashioned sort, built right upon the street, one solitary step leading up to their unpretentious brass-handled doors ; and on one of these an immaculate plate, the fresh ebony of its lettering testifying to its recent appearance, bore Richard Forde's name legibly set forth.

Mrs. Hancock, purple sprigged costume and all, was making her way down Minster-gate, to call on the wife of the canon in residence. Her ever-watchful eye descried, with no common feeling of outrage, the Saxons stopping at the young doctor's door.

"A whole batch of them," she subsequently complained to Mrs. Shorthouse, "dashing about completely unchaperoned, as usual, two girls and two young men, up in the air in that dangerous, fast turnout of theirs, going to turn the head of that poor little Leonora Forde, who has airs enough already, poor child, owing to her cruelly unprotected position. Well ! I am thankful to say I have never visited at Hesselburgh, never allowed myself to be mixed up with their promiscuous, half-professional set. I am sure they are quite lowering the tone of society in Norchester ; and what with the goings on at the Palace, the theatricals and dancing, I am sure its enough, as I repeatedly say to the Miss Presses, to make our own poor late bishop turn in his grave."

It would be untrue to assert that the arrival of that magical dog-cart did not send a little thrill and flutter through Leo's excitable frame, as she saw it from her decorously curtained drawing-room windows.

The gay young people inside belonged to a world of which the doctor's young sister had only had very occasional glimpses in her life, as yet. In her uncle Roper's parish, the middle-aged, childless squire and squiress had kept no company, and cared for no society. "We are quite out of the county," Mrs. Roper had been wont to say; which, seeing that the whole of England is popularly supposed to be divided into counties, gives rise to some confusion as to the exact geographical position of Sandwater vicarage.

But, as dear Jane Austen says, if a young woman is born to be a heroine, the perversity of forty surrounding families cannot hinder it; and so with Leo. The uncertainly located parish of Sandwater was left behind for ever, she was mistress of her brother's house in Norchester, and here was the Hesselburgh party stopping at her very door.

The vision lasted only a minute or two. The tall, dark man, sitting behind with Miss Saxon, sprang lightly down, rang, and was admitted. His party only waited till the door closed upon him, and then with nods and smiles dashed off again down to the cathedral, the streets here being too narrow to turn the horse with safety. Leo had just time to notice the pretty girl seated beside Tom, to yearn for a coat that should fit like hers, and just such gauntlet gloves, when Dick pushed open the door of the pretty, little room and said:

"This is my sister, Major Westmorland."

The tall Major greeted Leo without a smile. He was so very stiff and grave, and bored-looking, that the young girl was seized with almost the first fit of shyness she had ever experienced. She did just venture to ask him to sit down, to which he responded "Thanks," and remained stiffly standing. This chilling want of compliance so abashed her, that she sank into her low chair and took up her work, feeling quite at a loss. Dick, saying that he would order up lunch immediately, had vanished, leaving them to themselves, and surely if the Major had not pos-

essed a heart as hard as Benedick's, he need have found nothing in the arrangement to complain of.

Leo, in her low chair, was a picture worth contemplating. She wore a white dress, simple as could be; her soft, loose, dark hair was cunningly coiled round her pretty little head. Her complexion was radiant, her colour just a little bit heightened, and the most becoming shade of resentment on her coaxing, full mouth. Poor Dick could not know that such was the irritation of the Major's feelings at this moment, that the very fact of finding himself *tête-à-tête* with an unmarried woman reduced him to the last stage of supreme exasperation.

Leo was furious with herself. She told herself that it was her fault. She ought to know what to say to people of this description. A "county" girl would entertain him properly and easily. The silence soon became quite unendurable to her frank, confiding disposition. She must talk. After due deliberation she started.

"You knew Dick at Woolford didn't you?"

He looked vaguely at her.

"Dick?" he said, as if the name conveyed no impression to his mind.

"Richard, my brother," said poor Leo, with a rush of warm blood to her cheeks.

"Oh—ah! Pardon, I'm sure. Yes, I knew him at Woolford."

"You were in Colonel Barff's regiment, were you not?" she persisted, bravely.

"I was."

"It was through Colonel Barff that Dick got this practice. I was very glad, of course."

"Oh?"

"Yes, because he could have me to live with him, you see. He could not do that before."

Utter silence. It was not to be endured. Miss Forde arose, trembling with indignation.

"If you will excuse me a moment, I will go and

hurry luncheon ; you must be very hungry," she said, icily.

The Major went, with a start of alacrity, to open the door for her. At that moment the bell rang.

"Oh ! that is lunch. Please come down," said she, sweeping haughtily out before him, all her small dignity on the bristle.

But the bristle was quite wasted on her guest. He went downstairs after her quite mechanically, and took his seat at the dainty little luncheon-table without a thought of Forde's sister, except relief at being no longer obliged to talk to her alone.

He woke up a little at lunch, chatting to his friend, and once directly addressed an observation to Leo, who answered him with such alarming frigidity as to cause Dick to glance up in astonishment at a tone never before adopted by his merry little sister.

As soon as ever her carefully-concocted repast had been discussed, she rose and turned to him.

"You and Major Westmorland will smoke in the surgery, I suppose," she said. "I will send coffee in half an hour. Meanwhile, I will say good-bye to you," turning to Evelyn. "I have to go out. Dick, if you have time, look in at the Residence about five, and fetch me."

So saying, she bowed to the visitor and departed. Dick looked after her a little bewildered, and with an anxious glance at his friend to see if he were offended.

Westmorland was heaving a prodigious sigh of relief.

"Now at last I can talk to you," he said, putting his hand through the doctor's arm. "Come, sit down, my good fellow, I shall burst in a minute if I don't have it all out."

Upstairs, Leo was enduring the keenest mortification which she had ever suffered. She had taken such pains ! so carefully prepared her little house, and her little self, to receive her brother's friend nicely. She had gathered fresh flowers from the

quaint walled garden at the back of her small domain ; she had taken an hour to arrange her small drawing-room, another to garnish her luncheon-table. All had been in vain. The visitor had noticed neither her nor her surroundings. He had eaten mechanically, he had looked without seeing ; he was an ill-bred, hateful, uninteresting man.

This was a great pity, because he was decidedly good-looking. Did he mean to be rude—to ignore her ? Did he mean her to see that she was not to consider herself on a level with Muriel Saxon and her friends. Or did he consider her too absurdly young to be worth considering, or treating like a grown-up person ? Oh, how she longed to be able to crush him—to retaliate, or in some unmistakable way to show him that he had snubbed the wrong person.

Let her but have her opportunity, poor Evelyn would fare ill at her hands.

CHAPTER V.

A SUNDAY MOON.

Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things.

ROBERT BROWNING.

“Now at last ! You are quite sure you are ready to be bothered ?” said Westmorland, with eagerness, as he sank into a comfortable chair.

“Quite,” said Dick, calmly, settling himself very much at his ease opposite. “More than ready, anxious. You do look so uncommonly worried, old chap.”

“Yes, that's what I am. It is really telling upon me,” returned the Major, disconsolately ; “and yet

the whole story is a parcel of such abominable trash that I should not be in the least surprised if you were to burst out laughing when you hear it first. I know I did."

"Well, what is it?"

"It's an old, idiotic, purposeless family tradition, and my father has gone clean out of his mind on the point," said Westmorland shortly. "That's the long and short of it, and a pretty tale it is to have to tell of a cultivated man of this nineteenth century; but I believe my father never was quite like other people. Now, you are especially interested in various forms of insanity, are you not?"

Dick nodded.

"This is a most pronounced case. He is quite sane on every other point, on this one as mad as any hatter."

"Tell me what is the tradition, to begin with. Where did it come from? Has it any authority? Is it genuine? How did he come to hear it?"

"Exactly what I am going to tell you. I believe the prophecy to be so far genuine, that it dates back at least to the fourteenth century. We Westmorlands originally, I believe, came from the Border, and had a Scotch strain in us, which seems to have included the highly inconvenient gift of second-sight. As our ancestors grew more civilised, or more wealthy as the case may be, they migrated further south, to Feverell, where a Westmorland of Henry VII.'s time built Feverell Chase. Our pedigree has been very carefully preserved for several centuries, and it is a curious coincidence that the property has never, till the last generation, been without an heir in the direct line. Either the eldest son or his eldest son has always succeeded, until my own father, whose elder brother Charles died suddenly, young and unmarried. Excuse all this apparent digression—the reason for it will soon be obvious."

"Take your time. I'm always interested in old families," said Dick, puffing away.

“Well, when my governor came into possession of the Chase, he instituted a thorough search among the family archives. They had been much neglected in the days of my grandfather, who was, from all I can hear, an exceedingly commonplace person, like myself. His wife, however, Lady Camilla Hawtreys, was a most gifted woman, and from her, doubtless, my father inherits his talents ; for, you know, he is certainly brilliant above the average. He is an archæologist, a connoisseur in art, a bit of a poet, a painter, and altogether what I should call a dab at things literary and artistic. Naturally enough, his family history is of paramount interest to him. It is his hobby, his weak point. Well, as he was digging out old letters and wills and deeds, he came across this old rhyming prophecy. It was written by hand, and fastened with seals into the fly-leaf of an ancient, illuminated missal. It was dated below by the monk who wrote it, with the date of fourteen hundred and something or other, but with a note to the effect that, though here set down for the first time, it was of far greater antiquity, and was prophesied against the Westmorlands by the lord of the manor of Burchys, whoever he may have been. It appears that some dispute had arisen between the families, and the Westmorlands had satisfied their notions of family honour by butchering the son and grandson of this lord of the manor, so that he was left without heirs. In not unnatural annoyance he threw off this little *jeu d’esprit*, and sent it to his enemies with his kind regards. I don’t know whether or no it worried them at the time, but certainly that old lord of the manor has got his innings now. He must be thoroughly satisfied if he knows how his rubbishing doggerel embitters my existence.”

The tone was so tragic that Dick could not repress a smile.

“I knew you’d laugh,” said the Major, gloomily, “but you would laugh with the other side of your mouth if you had to live with my father. Here, read

the insane thing, and you will be still more diverted. Tell me if you understand how anybody can attach the slightest importance to it. Of course this is only a copy; the original is almost illegible—no breaks between the words, and no stops.”

The young doctor curiously took from his hand the paper he held out, and read the following:

“Westmorlonde was bolde to stryke
In that londe was none hym lyke,
But all to naught hys house shulde pyne,
Wo them ys that are born thereinne,
Withouten hope it shulde betyde,
The last sonne ys an only childe.
Sonne ys he of a yonger sonne.
Ner wife ne childer hath he non,
But yet the folk of the contre,
Beleve not that hit mygth be,
Gyf March with Sunday moon come inne,
Then wolde they beleve fayn.”

Dick perused this with a puzzled face.

“Is it quite certain,” at last he said, “that this thing dates back as far as the fifteenth century?”

“Oh, yes, it’s genuine enough as far as age goes,” said Westmorland, fretfully. “By the way, it was found in the sacristy of the private chapel at Feverell, it could scarcely have been forged; but my father submitted it to a large number of experts before he would believe that it was the age it claims to be. However, they all decided that there was no doubt at all on the matter. Even if Father Julius, who professed merely to copy it out, in reality invented the horrid thing himself, still it remains a prophecy, dating from the fifteenth century, confound it!”

“It’s rather odd, isn’t it?” said Dick, thoughtfully, staring at the irregular lines with knitted brow. “You’re an only son, are you not?”

“I am, as you know, worse luck!”

“And you are the son of a younger son, and you have no wife nor child.”

“True—all of it.”

"Well then, we come to this dark saying about the Sunday moon. What does that mean exactly?"

"I should think it means, when the new moon falls on Sunday, March 1st."

"Not a very common coincidence, I should imagine?"

"By no means. It has happened twice in a hundred and fifty years; it will happen again next year."

Dick whistled.

"Forde," burst out the Major, angrily, "I do believe you are superstitious."

"A little bit, perhaps," assented Dick, reluctantly, after a pause.

"You don't mean to say that you would put any faith in that astounding piece of nonsense?" fiercely cried Westmorland.

"I almost think I'd take precautions," laughed the doctor.

"Precautions? What precautions, in the name of common-sense?"

Dick laughed again.

"Get married, and the whole thing falls to the ground," he suggested, slyly.

This was too much; the Major's very fury made him calm.

"Forde," he said, icily, "you are worse than my father. Well! I am sorry to have troubled you."

"Westmorland, I'll fool no more," pleaded Dick, penitently. "It was a bit funny, you know. I felt compelled to suggest it; but seriously now, tell me more of this. You say this prophecy took complete hold of your father?"

"Extraordinary. Not when he first discovered it. My mother was then alive; it seemed hardly probable that I should be the only child, and most unlikely that I should not marry. As time went on, I think he forgot it a good deal. After my mother's death he travelled about considerably, both in Europe and Asia. My regiment was ordered to India, and he came out and wintered there, and enjoyed himself

greatly. It was about five years ago that he began to be really what I call mad on the subject. There was a Miss Hume out there in India, where my regiment was quartered: he took a fancy to her, and wanted me to do the same. I did not see it. Everybody called her a nice girl, so I suppose she was, but she seemed to me to be ready to flirt with any man who happened to come handy. I told my father he had better marry her himself if he thought so highly of her; but he is too fond of his liberty for that. However, I was rather incautious, I think; said something about having no intention of marrying, or rather to that effect; and so managed to set alight all this commotion about the prophecy.

“He took to reading it, poring over it, searching up old authorities, digging into monkish chronicles. In some antiquated county history—I forget what they call it—he found a mention of the existence of this threat, and of course that was the last straw. The history said that the chronicles of Barnisham monastery (destroyed at the Reformation) contained an account of an application from Evelyn Westmorland for a dispensation from the Pope, to allow him to put away his wife, mainly on the ground of her childlessness, an old prophecy in the family foretelling great evils if the succession departed from the direct line. Fortunately the poor lady herself settled the question by dying; and her fond husband, as our family tree informs us, had eight children by his second marriage. I think my father’s mind was always highly emotional, easily influenced. His researches and their results developed mania. He had a calendar forecast—solar and lunar, and so discovered that next year the prophecy will apply in all its details. Since then I have not had a moment’s peace. Morning noon and night is he at me when we are together, regularly every day does he write to me when we are apart. The thing is poisoning my existence, it has transformed him from a cultivated gentleman to a monomaniac, and really I have completely lost patience.”

"If you will pardon me," said Dick, interrogatively, "for what purpose is your father *at* you, as you so forcibly express it? What does he want you to do?"

"To do? Why, what you just now had the impertinence to suggest—to marry."

There was a world of derision in the Major's voice. Dick remained for a few moments dreamily puffing away at his pipe, his eyes fixed on the tall hollyhocks in the garden. At last,

"Pardon the unspeakable temerity of the question," he said, removing his gaze to his friend's thunder-cloud brow, "but why don't you marry, Westmorland?"

The fury of his companion reached a pitch. He sprang from his chair and walked noisily once or twice through the room.

"I decline to discuss the question," he said at last, in tones of the keenest irritation. "What has that to do with it all? What does it matter? It is beside the point."

"You may of course discuss it or not, just as you please," said Dick, very calmly, and without removing his pipe from his mouth, "but it seems to me that it is very intimately connected with the point."

"Hang it, Forde, you would not go and marry on such poor grounds? Sacrifice some unfortunate girl to an inane fragment of monkish superstition! How would such a marriage be likely to turn out?"

"But, apart from this question altogether, it seems strange you don't marry—that is my meaning. Most men are married before your age. It looks to me like a bit of perversity, you know: as though you had been so often egged on to do it that you had determined to resist merely for resistance' sake."

"I don't think it's that," said Westmorland, rather sadly. "It is that I am not that kind of man. I—I am not what you call impressionable. I am not a brilliant talker, as you well know; I don't care to carry cups of tea about a drawing-room, or waltz all night round and round till my head splits. And that

is all women care about, unless you get hold of one who frightens you to look at, and talks Aristotle to you. I never have seen the woman I could possibly endure to have always near me, far less the woman I could love. I think," sighed he, sadly, "I must be born out of my own century. The women of to-day are not my style."

"What century should you have chosen, had you been given *carte blanche*?" casually asked Dick.

"Oh, I don't know. I should like an honest girl, and one that could keep herself to herself; one that would not be everlastingly dressing and going out—but a companion. I don't want a housekeeper. . . . But what on earth is the use of talking? I can't tell you what she should be like, only that she should be quite unlike every other woman I have ever met."

"Well," said Dick, "I think you are rather a promising candidate for matrimony myself. I have decided hopes of you. A man like you always marries something about as unlike what he fancies as can possibly be imagined."

The Major gave a contemptuous laugh.

"Of course, any man may make a fool of himself," he observed. "I won't undertake to say that such a thing is impossible as regards me; but I do emphatically consider that it is most unlikely. As if to give me a still further warning, if warning were needed, here is Disney—my best friend Disney—just come a most complete cropper as regards his matrimonial schemes."

"Disney!" said Forde, with interest. "Poor Disney! has he indeed? Nice fellow, I always liked him. Exchanged into the—th when it was ordered to Ceylon, didn't he?"

"Yes, and that was the worst day's work he ever did in his life, poor chap! You knew him, of course? He went to Ceylon; got engaged to the reigning belle there—a Miss Merrion. She jilted him, and it has gone fearfully hard with him; he is coming home—

has thrown up everything. That's a woman's doing!"

"Did somebody more eligible turn up? I mean, what made her jilt him?" asked Dick.

"Well, I really am not quite clear. If it was as you suggest, Disney does not mention it. They had a disagreement, I believe, and she dismissed him then and there."

"Perhaps it was his fault," observed Dick.

"How could that be?" sharply questioned the Major.

"Why, he may have been in the wrong."

"But he wrote and implored her to re-consider it; went and knelt to her, I believe; did everything in his power! Don't tell me, sir. A woman who can solemnly plight her faith to a man, and then turn it all up in a minute because of some little wretched misunderstanding—I tell you they are all the same: you never know what it is you have done to offend them, till suddenly they turn round upon you. So uncertain women are. No matrimony for me, thank you."

"Well, in that case, I see no remedy for your present distress, I am afraid."

"Forde, are you speaking seriously?"

"Quite. You must either endure your father's entreaties patiently until the fatal date has gone by, or you must marry at once and calm his superstitious terror. Let me see—when may you consider yourself safe? I hardly know. The prophecy is not too explicit as to exact date:

"Gyf March with Sunday moon come inne,
Then wolde they beleve fayn."

You see, you are instructed only to look out for the fulfilment on that day: when it will come remains unrevealed."

"But can't you understand that I want you to help me? To put a stop to such intolerable folly; to see

my father, to diagnose him, to scatter his delusion somehow."

The doctor leaned meditatively forward; his pipe between his lips, his two hands spread out and lightly joined.

"I really don't see what I could do in that way," he said at last. "You don't want him shut up, I suppose? He is sane enough on other points. He does no harm, does he? Is not dangerous?"

"Not dangerous, isn't he? Going about on my behalf, proposing in my name to every good-looking girl he meets——"

"Does he do that, though?"

"Well, very nearly."

Dick was unable to help laughing.

"What a gay old boy!" he said, with unconcealable appreciation of the humour of the situation.

The Major looked first annoyed, then resigned.

"I suppose it is funny," he said, hopelessly. "When first it began I used to look on it in that light. Hanged if I can see the ludicrous side of it now."

He rose as if he felt it useless to discuss the subject further; but Dick, rising too, laid his hand on his arm.

"Look here," he said, "I think you are too desponding if, as you say, you consider the whole of this prophecy to be nonsense. You have only to submit to this sort of annoyance calmly for a few months, and leave it to time to prove the reasonableness of your conduct. Don't shake your head; I know it's very bad to bear, but why don't you get out of it? Winter abroad. Go to India for some tiger-shooting, and don't come back till the coast is clear."

The Major shook his head.

"You don't know my father," he said; and in his voice was that pitying tenderness with which a mother might own that her darling was afraid of the dark. "I could never leave him," he added, quietly, "he would go raving mad, I am sure of it. You have never seen him as I have. Come up to Hesselburgh."

The young doctor reddened.

"I don't know the Saxons."

He did not add how much he wished to know them. In his own quiet way, Richard was ambitious. He knew he was clever, he wanted to make a career. Fresh from the hospital, full of ideas, *au courant* with all the modern improvements, he felt almost inclined to despair of Norchester. Mrs. Saxon seemed the only person likely to sympathise with him. He had heard rumours of the forthcoming monster meeting of the Women's Sanitary League in her grounds. He did ardently long to have some share in the demonstration.

"Oh, I'll introduce you," said the Major, calmly. "Young Saxon told me this morning that he wanted to know your sister."

"Did he indeed?"

"Yes; they are sociable people, very kind. I'll introduce you, and get you to watch my father. I want to know if something can't be done. In short," concluded the Major, taking up his hat, "something *must* be done. You will see that I cannot marry, according to my own notions of honour, so that solution of the difficulty is impossible. If only we could somehow twist that confounded prophecy, and persuade him that it meant something quite different! But you shall see him, Forde, and then we will consult again."

"Very good, I will. I wish you were not so set against matrimony. I am quite upset by what you tell me about Disney. Who was the girl who treated him so shamefully?"

"Miss Merrion."

"And you say he is coming home?"

"By the *Malabar*."

"I shall ask him to come and stay with me, and teach him a little philosophy," said Dick, laughing.

CHAPTER VI.

“ I THINK YOU KNEW A FRIEND OF MINE.”

My friend was already too good to lose,
And seemed in the way of improvement yet,
When she crossed his path with her hunting-noose,
And over him drew her net.

ROBERT BROWNING.

“It’s all very well,” said Tom, irritably, “but it is really nonsense to tell me you profess to understand this sort of thing. Hand over the beastly volume, Hope, and I’ll read you a selection.”

“I shall certainly not hand over my precious book to you! You Goth! You Vandal! You boy without a soul!”

“You girl without a brain! I tell you what! One very salutary result has accrued from all my education. It has developed my critical faculty, it has given me an inquiring mind. When I see something in print I don’t take it for granted that it’s sense, I ask at once, Why is this thus? What is the reason of this thusness? Now, if you were to imitate me in this, and solemnly ask yourself the why and wherefore of some of old Browning’s remarks, why, you’d collapse! You couldn’t go on admiring him, you would say, as I say: The unintelligible is not the beautiful, the incoherent is not the admirable. Lucidity does not make a man a poet, but no man can be a poet who is not lucid. That’s what you would say if you had my felicitous flow of language, Hope! Which you haven’t, Hope!”

“Do you really mean me to infer that you think Mr. Browning should have brought down his poetry

to the level of Mr. Thomas Saxon's understanding?" demanded Hope with scorn ineffable, as she lay back in a luxurious wicker chair in Muriel's sitting-room at Hesselburgh.

It was the witching hour of five o'clock tea. The three young people had played tennis to their hearts' content all the afternoon, and now sat exhaustedly in their tennis costumes, enjoying themselves, "reveling," as Hope said, "in the luxury of an honestly-earned fatigue," and quarrelling, as usual.

Muriel was motionless behind the pages of the last new novel—she left Hope and Tom to fight over Robert Browning as they pleased. Tom was on his back on the sofa, fanning himself with his shapeless tennis hat and ready for the fray, as usual.

"We are crushing," he remarked with a fine disdain, in answer to Hope's thrust; "but better men than I am can't digest your pet poet, my lady; you know that as well as I do."

"I suppose many people console themselves with the idea that they are not the only fools in the world, Mr. Tom."

"And many others do love to plume themselves on understanding what another fellow can't, don't they duckie?"

"That is a position in which many of your friends must be apt to find themselves, whether they wish it or not!"

"Ah! I suppose that is why I have so many friends. It is not a very flattering suggestion, but I feel at last I know the reason why I am sought out so persistently by the great and noble ones of the land. Thanks, so much, for enlightening me!"

"Another cup of tea, please, Tom."

This brought the critic to a sitting posture, and for a moment stopped his tongue.

"My dear maligned Browning," fondly said Hope, gazing lovingly at the page before her. "So they say you are unintelligible, do they? They call you unmelodious! Tom, listen to this:

“ ‘If at times

My heart fails, as monotonous I paint
 These endless cloisters and eternal aisles
 With the same series—virgin, babe and saint,
 With the same cold, calm, beautiful regard ;
 At least no merchant traffics in my heart !
 The sanctuary’s gloom at least shall ward
 Vain tongues from where my pictures stand apart.
 Only prayer breaks the silence of the shrine,
 Where, blackening in the daily candle-smoke,
 They moulder on the damp wall’s travertine,
 ’Mid echoes the light footstep never woke ! ’ ”

The delicate clear girl’s voice gave the most just expression to the devotion breathed in the rhythmical lines. The mixture of spiritual fervour and natural longing after recognition from the world, trembled in each sad utterance.

“ There ! ” she said, with a sigh, “ I never read that without feeling as if I stood in one of those dim continental churches, with their odour of stale incense ; their smoky gloom mellowing the trumpery finery of their shrines into harmony, and their stillness drawing you irresistibly down on your knees to pray.”

“ Oh, yes, that’s the unknown painter fellow, isn’t it ? ” said Tom, who was by no means as ignorant as he pretended. “ I don’t believe in him a bit, you know. He would have been famous if he could, you bet ? Old Baily, our head-master, used to dose us with Browning on a Sunday afternoon, and some of the fellows were very keen on it ; but it isn’t my line. Poor old Pictor ! How awfully out he was, if he only knew,

“ ‘The sanctuary’s gloom at least shall ward
 Vain tongues from where my pictures stand apart.’ ”

If only he had been in Dresden with me and heard the Yankee’s remark on the Sistine madonna ! ”

“ But she is not hung in a church,” objected Hope.

“ No, but in a room by herself, you know ; and everybody talks with bated breath, and a sort of hush falls over you when first you go in, and there is a

pause. Well! my Yankee walked right in, and stood, hands behind him, staring up for a minute or so; then, turning to the misguided friend who had accompanied him, he said, very loud, 'She's an uncommonly fine-looking girl. I've a cousin remarkably like her myself, in the States.'

"Tom!"

"That's a solemn fact. I heard him say it. He asked me the next night at table d'hôte, which of Shakespeare's plays had Valentine and Orson in it. He was a treat. But I liked him. He told me if I would come over to Brooklyn, he would see that I had front places everywhere!"

"Did he truly say that of the San Sisto?"

"He truly did. Ask Muriel if you don't believe me. She heard it. But now, hand over that old Browning. You have given me an extract, I'll give you one. Where is the thing? I know it's got a title that has nothing whatever to do with it, like one of Albert Moore's pictures, don't you know? Two flabby girls in green and yellow draperies lolling on a bathroom floor, one with a book, the other with a hollyhock. You consult the catalogue and find the title of the picture is 'Nightshade.' After a few painful moments, in which you feel as if you had lost your senses, you descry three red berries in the bottom left-hand corner of the canvas. Well, that's one of Browning's dodges, all over! Listen to this:

" 'Soft!' I'd say, 'soul mine,
Three-score and ten years
Let the blind mole mine,
Digging out deniers!
Let the dazed hawk soar,
Claim the sun's rights too!
Turf 't is thy walk's o'er,
Foliage thy flight's to!'

What have you to say to those two last lines, eh, miss? Shall I take them for a model of style?"

Hope's eager answer died away suddenly, for there was a modest tap at the door.

"That's nurse," observed Tom, "she shall be umpire. I'll read over this verse and see if she finds the sense obvious. Come in, old lady! Don't be bashful!"

The door opened, and Major Westmorland walked somewhat hesitatingly in.

Up flew Tom, with an irreverent exclamation.

"Major! I beg your pardon! I thought you were nurse!"

"You compliment me," said the Major, smiling; "I feel as I were intruding, but Mrs. Saxon sent me in for some tea."

"Wake up, Muriel, ring for fresh tea, and we'll each move on a place like the hatter," cried Tom. "Come, here's a first-class chair! Sit down and tell us what Miss Forde said to you."

The visitor obediently sat down, settling himself in his chair with a manner decidedly his own—impossible to describe, but very characteristic.

He was one of those men who are remembered for their manners more than for their faces. Not that his manner was so very good, but that it was so exceedingly distinctive. No disguising would disguise him, his every action would betray his identity.

He sat down with a sense of comfort and ease. He had walked the five miles from Minster-gate to Hesselburgh, and had come in both hot and dusty. Rest was sweet, and the pretty rose-scented room exquisitely refreshing. Moreover, the pouring out of his mind to his friend Forde had been a great relief, though no very satisfactory solution of his difficulties had been arrived at. He felt more sociable, more ready to be amused than when he encountered poor Leo at luncheon time.

His eye rested with a sense of satisfaction on Hope's slim young figure, occupying only half of the big chair she sat in. Her pale pink gown threw up her nut-brown hair in pleasant relief; the two hands folded lightly on her lap, with a fresh cambric handkerchief lightly crushed between, were such well-shaped, lady-

like, charming little hands, that he could hardly have desired a more pleasing object for his lazy gaze to rest upon. Muriel too, calm and fair, pouring out fresh tea, gave a comforting impression of boundless leisure ; fine weather and other ingredients for happiness all being a matter of course. Everything always was a matter of course to Muriel. Nothing that occurred ever seemed to surprise or disconcert her. If it were wet, it appeared trivial to complain of anything so entirely expected ; if fine, the bare idea of having supposed it would be anything else seemed preposterous.

There was no pretence about any of the three—they seemed so simple that the lonely fellow's heart went out to them. It would be pleasant to make a fourth among them, he thought. Surely these two girls were not designing—they were not after the type of the Colombo Miss Merrion, whose name seemed always ringing in his ears. He was so sick of the country-house girl of the period, with her elaborate tea-gowns and *coiffures*, her boundless experience in flirtation, her worldliness and cynicism and *savoir faire*. He was indeed glad that they had come to Hesselburgh instead of accepting Lord Bala's invitation. He knew the coverts here of old. He would get plenty of sport every day if he chose, and look forward to coming in to a cup of tea in this bewitching room, with these three happy young beings to divert him with their fresh nonsense.

He sat for about twenty minutes, listening delightedly to their chatter—saying nothing himself, but keenly enjoying all the nonsense talked by the others. Only once was he directly appealed to, and that by Tom, on the all-important Browning question. After a little hesitation the Major was fain to confess to a decided liking for the poet in question ; on which Hope softly clapped those expressive little hands together, so letting the handkerchief flutter to the ground, and giving him a chance to stoop his tall head till he had reclaimed it. A little whiff of violets came from

it as he returned it to its owner. He thought that Hope somehow suggested violets, and wondered what her other name was.

She was evidently not quite so young as Miss Saxon. There was a pretty little assumption of seniority in her manner, but still she was young; the bloom of girlhood still hung on her small, smooth cheeks, there were no dark lines under the limpid eyes. That fresh enjoyment of life just for the sake of living, which belongs only to youth, was evidently hers. The flash of that sudden smile—that smile revealing such an unexpected, tantalising, wonderful dimple just in the corner of the sweet, frank mouth—oh, that was indeed the smile of youth, free and unburdened with memories, the smile of that liberty which comes only of a clear conscience. So reflected the Major for his own delectation, while Tom was narrating spicily to Hope how a certain London firm sent emissaries to the pit of every London theatre to collect orange-peel for their marmalade; and, when he had succeeded in making her feel quite sick, consolingly adding that all theirs was home-made, and she might really rely on it.

At this unwelcome moment one of the footmen appeared at the door.

"Miss Saxon and Mr. Thomas is wanted in the drawing-room, to see Admiral and Mrs. Bligh."

"It is always like that just when we are comfortable," said Muriel, rising with perfect serenity. "Major Westmorland, I must leave you to amuse Miss Merrion."

A sudden dead silence fell, as the door closed on the brother and sister. Major Westmorland stood with knit brows, looking puzzled; he thought he had heard incorrectly.

"Excuse my stupidity, but *what* did Miss Saxon say your name was?" he asked.

"My name is Merrion," she answered,—with that smile!

"I suppose you are no relation of some Merrions

I heard about," he said, nervously. "Were you ever in Ceylon?"

There was a look, yes! undoubtedly there was a look as of some memory that was not pleasant in Hope's clear eyes.

"Yes, I was in Colombo all last winter; I have not long been home."

He could not believe his ears. But no! impossible! This could not be the girl! She must have a sister.

"You have a sister, have you not?" he asked, eagerly.

She shook her head.

"Two brothers, but no sister."

Horror! He felt as if he, like his father, were going mad. Could it be conceivable that this fresh, innocent-faced girl was the very woman whose name he execrated above all women just then, the woman who had broken his friend's heart? Oh, if it were so, then was every woman ever born a mass of lies and treachery—the fairer her face the deeper the depth of untruth it concealed. He was resolved to ascertain; for, if this were true, then never would he believe in any feminine thing hereafter forever.

"If you were in Colombo last winter," he slowly said, "I think you knew a friend of mine out there, Captain Disney."

The colour flew to the girl's face, suffusing neck and brow in a scarlet tide. He could see how the name moved her. She did not answer for a minute or two; perhaps she could not command her voice. At last,

"Was it from Captain Disney that you heard about me?" she asked, looking straight at the Major as she put the question.

"It was;" he answered, drily, yet unable for some reason, to help feeling mean as he met that direct gaze.

She saw, most likely, the curled lip, the bitter contempt in his face as they confronted each other, but she did not waver. She had risen too, and stood

before him, slight and girlish and slim in her simple gown ; so innocuous to look upon, and yet he could feel how dangerous she was.

"He is a great friend of yours?" she asked.

"He is a great friend ; my best."

"I think we had better not speak of him," she said, gently.

"I entirely agree with you. I could not trust myself to speak of him, to you."

Without another word she rose and walked out of the room, closing the door behind her. The little handkerchief again fell to the ground, and again, as the door shut, the Major picked it up. The whiff of violets were again discernible.

"Faugh!" he said, to himself, with feelings of the bitterest disgust, "that I should be in the house with her! Of all women on this earth that I should be under the same roof with the girl who jilted Disney! And the last woman likely to do such a thing if one went by the look of her. What an extraordinary coincidence! What an unfortunate thing!"

CHAPTER VII.

A DECLARATION OF WAR.

Utter contemptibility, nor more
Nor less. Contemptibility--exempt
How could I, from its proper due--contempt.

R. BROWNING.

HOPE MERRION, as she walked swiftly along the corridor in the direction of her own room, was experiencing a feeling altogether new to her. Never once in her three or four years career as a "grown-up young lady" had any male thing looked upon her save with approbation. This evening a man—a stranger—had

dared to stand before her with indignant contempt in every line of his strong face. He had scorched her with his scorn, he had lashed her with the expression of his angry eyes.

Of course it was, in itself, a little thing. What should Hope care for the unconcealed ill-opinion of one stray man? Why trouble that he should be ill-bred enough to show it?

It is hard for a woman, nevertheless, to endure a man's disdain.

Disney's friend! Poor Disney! And he despised her. He looked down upon her, as a fickle woman, who had laid his friend's heart in the dust and trodden on it for sport. She even laughed a little, though sadly, as she fancied for a moment the light in which Captain Disney's friend must regard her.

She walked into her room, which was flooded with evening sunshine. A lime-tree looked in through one of the windows, and its translucent leaves were wonderful with the effect of warm light through them.

The house was quite a modern one, built in the pretty "Queen Anne" affectation of a few years ago; all the windows were casemented, and had deep window-seats. Miss Merrion went across her room and sat down, with her forehead against the stone mullion, and the lime branches softly caressing her innocent-looking cheek.

"And of course it is true," she reflected. "I did break it off. I cannot deny it. I cannot deny that he thought I treated him badly. Oh! the satire of it! *I treated him badly!*" A small sarcastic laugh escaped her. "Oh, life is so very hard to live," was her inward lament. "It all goes on so nicely for a bit, you slip along so easily, and feel so content with yourself, and then all of a sudden, without any warning, there is a tangle and a knot, what my nurse used to call a 'snarl' in my hair! . . . And you find everything has broken off short. I had a presentiment this morning that something unpleasant

was coming. That man ! I wish he would go away."

It was not so much the manifest disapproval of the Major, as the memories he had stirred, which so discomfited her. He had brought keenly to mind something that she wished so particularly to forget—her great mistake, the passage in her life which she must always so keenly regret. She hated the bare mention of her ill-fated visit to Ceylon. But this man's attitude put things in a new, a worse light. She felt as if she had never before appreciated her discarded lover's side of the question. She felt herself more to blame than ever before, in face of the righteous anger of the captain's friend. It was as unpleasant as novel, it stirred up a most distasteful feeling within her, a feeling of guilt. She struggled against the injustice of it, but could not banish it.

And now she had to be in the same house with the man who held this opinion of her. Day after day she would have to meet him and know what he thought. Oh, certainly, her pleasure was over ; the visit should be shortened as much as decency permitted. How easy it had been to forget painful things in Tom's jovial company ! How pleasant to run wild with him, and to enjoy each day as it rolled by, without caring for the days behind, or fearing those to come !

Now, the face of this man, Edgar Disney's friend, would reproach every peal of laughter, deprecate every light-hearted ramble. It would be a perpetual reminder, a constant calling to order, of the girl who had behaved so badly, and had so little right to exult in her unjustly recovered freedom. For the hundredth time in her life she wished she had never met Edgar Disney.

The vanity of that wish brought tears to her eyes, rare tears, for Hope very seldom cried.

Was it to be worse than she thought ? A dark background henceforth inseparable from the picture of her life ? A hot blush of shame crept over her

small, expressive face ; the hardly-wrung tears coursed each other unheeded over her cheeks. Her little mouth was drawn down piteously at the corners. Westmorland had made her very miserable. The small summer wind sighed sympathetically among the lime-leaves, and ruffled her pretty hair. The sun sank lower, lower towards the dark hill which would presently hide him from view. Hope felt very lonely.

A childish wish sprang up all uninvited in her heart for some one with strong arms to enfold her, a broad breast to support her forlorn head, a comforting voice to tell her that she must not be unhappy. There was none such in the world. Her brother Fred was married, and lived a wealthy, commonplace life in London, with his handsome, commonplace wife and his three fine, healthy children. Her brother Herbert was with his regiment in Ceylon, and very much inclined to agree with Major Westmorland about Hope's treatment of Disney.

The girl was an orphan, and her nominal home was with Fred in Berkeley Square, or with her aunt, the Honourable Mrs. Paul, in Adelaide Crescent, Brighton. Neither of these homes was in any way congenial to the girl. She liked better to be with her school-friend, Muriel Saxon, than anywhere else. Now, in consequence of that wretched affair last winter, was her happiness here to be marred as well?

She was used to take a very healthy, rational view of life ; there was nothing morbid or hysterical in her nature ; repining was a most unusual thing with her. But this evening she had this strange feeling of loneliness—such a sensation as might be the experience of an accused maiden in the lists with no champion to do battle for her.

“There is no one to stand up for me,” she reflected sadly. “Nobody except Lady Caroline.”

Lady Caroline Loftus was an Irish cousin who had chaperoned Hope to Ceylon and defended the girl

through thick and thin. But Lady Caroline being the sole stay of her family, all more or less infirm and with incomes impaired by a long course of boycotting, was not by any means always available. Hope wanted her now.

She wanted some one to raise her in her own estimation, to soothe her ruffled pride, replace her lowered self-respect. But fruitless longing is a dangerous as well as a strikingly futile occupation ; it begets "tears, idle tears," and other inconveniences in the shape of headaches and swollen eyelids. Leo Forde might have been surprised had she known how very much abased was the artistically arranged head of the Hope who had smiled so buoyantly that morning from her seat at Tom's side in the dog-cart.

Hope bethought her in time that she must not appear at dinner with swollen eyelids, if only to avoid giving occasion of triumph to that odious Major. She applied first the traditional cold water ; then with more success, *eau-de-Cologne*. Just as almost all traces, were obliterated, Bowen, her maid, appeared to dress her.

A small reaction had set in. Hope was angry at her own late break-down. She was defiant now, determined to show herself by no means conscience-stricken. Who was the Major, pray, that he or his opinion should have any influence with her? She was not quite so weak as that, she should hope.

She dressed herself with special care, hung perilously out of her window to snatch some of the climbing *gloire de Dijons* for a finishing touch and when she was ready, walked fearlessly down to what Tom called the "week-day drawing-room," prepared to brave whatever might befall.

Only one person was present when she entered—Mr. Westmorland the elder—seated at a Chippendale writing-table, carefully inscribing something in a small, delicately-bound volume. He looked very handsome as the evening light fell upon him, his gold nippers forming, as they often do with men, a

decided improvement to his face and expression. It was never the custom of the Saxon family to assemble one moment before it was necessary. Mrs. Saxon and her ever-faithful spouse were probably roaming the kitchen-gardens together, and contemplating the wall-fruit. Tom was doubtless in the stables, or giving a valedictory glance to his new retriever-pup; and Muriel was invariably late for everything.

Mr. Westmorland looked up, over his spectacles, as Hope rustled softly in.

"Ah! Miss Merrion," he said, rising gallantly, "there you are! Let me find you a seat. How pretty the young ladies do look nowadays in their well-fitting gowns. The young should always wear white! Ah, my dear, I am not a bigot, as so many old fogeys are, I march with the times. I freely admit that dress has improved tremendously of late. We had no such thing when I was young, no such thing as art applied to dress!"

Hope sank with a pleased laugh into the chair placed by the old beau.

"Oh, how clever you are!" she said, "you have done me so much good with that pretty compliment. I was feeling a little dissatisfied with myself, and you not only saw what was amiss, but knew at once how to remedy it! Do I really look nice?"

She turned up to him a look of playful daring, before which his elderly outworks went down without a struggle. What a witch this girl was! For a moment his heart leapt within him as it flashed across him, that even Evelyn could hardly stand against a power such as this. Its unconsciousness was the charm of it. He remained for a moment transfixed. Many and many a pretty girl had he met, and he despised them all; but rarely had he encountered one with these allurements, with this subtle, nameless magic about her every look and tone.

"Here for the first time in my life," he thought, "I see a woman whom men might die for, a woman so far above the average nice girl that she could

never be supplanted nor forgotten, a woman who, dead, could hold the life-long devotion of a living man, even in this cold-hearted century of ours."

"How you look at me!" said Hope, tentatively. "I am afraid you disapprove of my asking straight out for a compliment."

"I am silent for want of inspiration, my dear young lady; an every-day compliment will hardly suit such a beauty as one meets once in a lifetime."

A soft glow of pleasure and interest lit up the girl's face. Leaning on her elbow she smiled at him.

"That is beautiful," she said, "it is like the compliments the gentlemen at Bath made in the time of *Evelina*! And you said it so well, quite as if you meant it! I like to be talked to like that. It makes me feel as if I were on a pedestal."—"He is far nicer than his son," she was inwardly reflecting.

"If I were young again, Miss Merrion," said he, with a gallant bow, "you should hear what I could do in the way of a compliment. Ah! They have lost the art nowadays! Worse than that, they pride themselves upon it. Had you been young when I was, you should have had more than pretty speeches! I would have written verses in your praise; I should not have been ashamed to serenade you either! In those days a young man was proud of his love, he cared not who knew how he adored his lady, whether she were kind or cruel. Ha!" he laughed satirically, "we have indeed changed all that. Secrecy is the order of the day—secrecy, lest the tender masculine vanity should by chance receive a blow, lest any one should guess that the valuable self has been offered and rejected! The young men like to be on the safe side, Miss Merrion. If you refuse them in private, it is so easy for them to at least infer, if they do not announce, in public, that you were very ready to have had them, if they had but asked you! I know them! Insufferable puppies!"

"Oh, that is so true!" said Hope, with vivacity. "So very true, indeed it is! I know a girl who was

treated just like that ! Do you know what the consequence is ? That girls are beginning to think that, in self-defence, they must do away with reticence, and publish what hitherto they have felt it a point of honour to conceal ! We shall soon begin to make lists of our victims' names, as I hear they do in America."

"I should, if I were you," said Mr. Westmorland, with his admiring gaze fixed on the girl.

He was in elysium for the time being. Every little movement, each fleeting expression and momentary gesture of this girl increased his admiration of her. Here indeed was a heart worth conquering, and, as his keen instinct told him, a heart not easily to be conquered. Oh, she was charming—charming ! If Evelyn were not a very flint, he must be touched at last. Evelyn's father wished he were young again—wished that he were once more the handsome, dangerous Clifford Westmorland who had carried off the reigning heiress and beauty in the teeth of many rivals, being only a younger son, with nothing but himself to recommend him. Such an enterprise had been what his soul loved. Now the desire for it had passed away. Ill-health had robbed him prematurely of his youth—what he wanted was to see his own experience reproduced in his son. But no ! Hopelessly stolid, hopelessly perverse, was Evelyn. As his father frequently tauntingly told him, he seemed to be born without the capacity for love.

But, whatever might be the father's private opinion of his unimpressionable son, it was by no means his policy to speak of him slightly to others—least of all to this girl, whom he already coveted as his daughter-in-law. Rather was it his aim, by a few casual, well-directed insinuations, to inspire an interest in this disappointing person, to seek to fire the feminine imagination with an idea which he himself believed to be the greatest of delusions—namely, that the Major, being such still water, ran very deep.

"Yes," he said, reflectively, idly tapping one of his

well-shaped, carefully *soignées* hands with his gold *pince-nez*, "I am always telling that son of mine that people will say he has been rejected if he goes about with that long face, and remains much longer a bachelor. But my son is hard to please—a family failing: decidedly hard to please."

"Is he? I daresay," said Hope, unresponsively, and with a little inward shrinking from a disagreeable memory.

"Oh, yes! Look at him—unmarried still! Some people might think he had been hard hit, you know; but I know better. I am in his confidence, and I know it is the family fate."

It was Mr. Westmorland's invariable custom to weave such pleasing fictions into his conversation, whenever the case seemed to require them. He paused a moment to enjoy the sound of these, and then resumed.

"Have you ever noticed his chin—the prominence of his chin? That denotes ideality. Such a man will go through life seeking an ideal. If he realises it, well and good: if not, he will never be mated."

"I should think the latter is more probable," said Hope, drily.

She was greatly amused. Tom had prepared her, it will be remembered, for the elder Westmorland's vicarious love-making.

"I should have said so yesterday, Miss Merrion," said the handsome old man, with so much intention that she almost laughed outright.

Just then the door opened, and the subject of this interesting conversation stalked solemnly into the room, his face rearing itself gloomily over his expanse of immaculate shirt-front.

Hope's heart gave a nervous throb as he entered, and he, when he perceived her, remained at the further end of the room, and looked out of the most distant window.

"Come and join us, Evelyn," said his father, in his blandest tones. "Miss Merrion and I are having

a most interesting discussion on a very vital point—as to what are likely to be the consequences to a man who goes through life with an ideal.”

“That is a subject on which I should imagine Miss Merrion to be excellently well qualified to speak,” said the Major, with slow composure. As he spoke, he stooped, unbolted the window, and passed out upon the lawn, where he was immediately seen in conversation with his host and hostess.

“The manners of a bear,” reflected his fond father, with wrath unspeakable.

“I hate him,” was Hope’s simple reflection, as she bit her lip with resentment.

Mrs. Saxon walked into the room, removing from her shoulders the wrap she had worn for her garden excursion, and revealing herself in virgin white, as usual, her appearance conveying a general impression that head and neck and arms alike required covering, or adornment of some kind.

Her son dashed in at almost the same moment, hastily fastening the left cuff of his shirt, and with an air of having been hustled into his clothes at the shortest notice.

“We won’t wait for Muriel ; Major Westmorland, please take Miss Merrion,” said Mrs. Saxon.

As she spoke, the door opened to admit of Muriel’s leisurely entrance, as cool as Tom’s had been flurried. Her the Major deliberately approached, offering his arm.

“Muriel, oh ! I said Hope,” began Mrs. Saxon.

“I thought you addressed my father,” said Evelyn, innocently.

“I see,” thought Hope, defiantly, as with a merry smile at her hostess she took Tom’s joyfully extended arm and sailed away to the dining-room. “I see, he is going to give his mind to slighting me, to making my life a burden with little insults. All very amusing, my dear sir, so long as you have it all your own way ; but two can play at that game, and I am not quite a novice either, as you may chance shortly to discover.”

CHAPTER VIII.

A NORCHESTER FESTIVITY.

My son will find revealed
My love, by his. I bow resigned my head :
But love, alas ! comes idly to the dead !

WARBURTON PIKE.

THE Finches were of the more genial denizens of Norchester. They dwelt a mile or two out of the town, on the opposite side to Hesselburgh. The family was small, consisting only of a handsome, kindly, elderly man, and his third wife. Nature had not framed Mr. Finch to live alone ; and when his two helpmeets were successively carried from him, leaving no children to supply their places, his eminently sociable disposition prompted him to seek a third. They were the sweetest tempered couple for miles around, and Duffield, as their pretty, comfortable, unpretentious place was called, was almost the only house where one met, united, those three deadly schisms—the county clique, the cathedral clique, and the town clique. It gave Mr. Finch just as much real pleasure to receive Mrs. Hancock and the Miss Presses, and to fill them with his good things, as to entertain the Dean himself, with his cultivated paganism, and his hideous wife ; or the Carey-Lenoxes, with their promiscuous troop of visitors, their scandalous little court stories, and their entire belief in their own superiority.

The Finches liked their visitors to come *en masse*. No ceremonious picking out of two representatives would satisfy the genial host.

“Why, Mrs. Saxon,” he would say, “where are all the young people you had with you in the Minster

last Sunday? Such a delightful group of pretty faces, I was looking forward to having my gardens decorated gratis!"

Mrs. Saxon approved of the Finches. She liked them because there was no humbug about them. Everything genuine found favour in her sight. She liked their *omnium gatherum* too. Priding herself on being a daughter of the people, she mixed with whom she chose, careless of any offence she so gave to local prejudice. She never declined an invitation to Duffield, knowing that there she was sure of meeting everybody, and of being thoroughly well amused.

The Hesselburgh party, accordingly, on the day following the arrival of the Westmorlands, had orders to turn out in force to one of the Finches' big garden-parties.

"Seven of us," said Mrs. Saxon with pride, surveying them all assembled in the hall. "Two for the victoria, four for the dog-cart—oh, are you going to ride, Athelstan?" addressing her husband.

"No, my dearest; the Major is going to ride," said Mr. Saxon, amiably.

"Oh! How was that arranged?" demanded his wife, in some surprise. "I thought the four young people preferred driving together?"

"Westmorland's own choice, *mater*," said Tom, lightly, as he threw the dust-rug over Miss Merrion's knees; "so Hope and I are going to sit behind, and *pater*'s going to drive, and if we don't get spilt in the middle of the market-place, why, my name isn't Tom Saxon, that's all."

"Tom, you had better not let your father drive Maidenhair, you really had not," said the *mater*, anxiously. "Major Westmorland, I am afraid you are sacrificing yourself for the public weal."

"On the contrary, I assure you," replied Evelyn, in those conventional tones which may mean anything you please.

"Oh, well, settle it as you choose," said the lady who never made a fuss about anything; "but Ath-

elstan, put on your spectacles, I beg, or you will run into something to a certainty."

"Burrowes, you might put a little lint and arnica into the trap for bandaging the wounded," said Tom irreverently, to the footman. "It's all serene, *mater*," he added consolingly; "Muriel can drive Maiden-hair if she proves too much for *pater*."

"Oh, Muriel, to be sure," said Mrs. Saxon, in a relieved tone, stepping into the victoria with Mr. Westmorland.

"Master Tom is a handful," observed that gentleman.

He disliked Tom because he never knew whether he was laughing at him or not, the young gentleman's command of feature being great.

"Tom?" said the *mater*, coolly. "Oh, he's very well in hand; but I give him his head a bit while he is fresh. If you hold them in too tight you spoil their mouth, you know; young men or colts, it is all the same."

"Ah, that is all very well, my dear madam," sighed the widower, "but it does not always answer. Give them an inch and they will take an ell. Look at my son."

"I do look at him, and a better son I never saw. He is a credit to your training."

He heaved a sigh. Should he or should he not confide to this sympathising friend a part of his distress?

He stole a look at her. Much as he admired her ability and appreciated her *cuisine*, he did wish she were not quite so frankly, so undisguisably hideous. She wore a straw hat to-day, with a plain band of ribbon—a hat which would have looked simply bewitching on Leo Forde. It was a caricature in its present position. Yet how kind she was! How he always enjoyed his visits to her house, the run of her library, the please-yourself ease and comfort of the whole *ménage*. His mouth seemed to become unsealed in spite of himself.

"You must know that I am distressed about my son," he said.

"Indeed!" said she. "You surprise me."

"Ah! doubtless—doubtless. It is a great trouble to me, I freely own. It seems to me, Mrs. Saxon, that fathers and sons do not often understand each other."

"Very likely not. For the reason that many fathers, in their extreme folly, expect their sons to be like them. It is a most unusual thing, as my experience shows me, for a son to resemble his father closely, either in tastes or disposition. Look at my Tom as a shining example! But is it impossible to understand a nature because it is unlike your own? I think not. And see what opportunities parents have—if they would but use them—of finding out their children's dispositions. When a child is young, it is unconscious; it will betray itself a thousand times a day: its natural tendencies lie bare before you. I know my two, as no human being on earth knows them. They are not in the least like either their father or me; but that does not distress us by any means."

"Ah! no. Very true, as you say; but my son is a different sort: he is so terribly reserved."

"Now, of course he is. Few men of his age wear their heart on their sleeve. But how about those days when he wore velvet frocks and long curls? He was scarcely reserved then, was he?"

"I am sure," Mr. Westmorland was fain to confess—"I am sure I have no distinct recollection of what he was. Young children have never interested me greatly. He was with his mother, or the nurses, I suppose."

"Ah! true—he has lost his mother," said Mrs. Saxon, with a sudden inflection of real pity in her voice. "It is the mother who is nature's own detective—who can see through the child's transparent wiles, distinguish shyness from want of feeling, and ignorance from impertinence. I have sometimes wished I had a larger nurseryful—it is so unspeakably

interesting to watch the development of a family of children."

"Humph! I neglected my opportunities," said Evelyn's father, drily. "I belong to an older school, Mrs. Saxon. I have always sympathised with Sir Anthony Absolute, I am bold enough to confess. I expect that, when I give an order, my son shall obey it. If not, I have my remedy—I can disinherit him." He spoke with a suppressed excitement, red spots glowing in his pale cheeks, and tremulously, as if in defiant protest. "That is my theory—make them feel it. If they choose to be rebellious, appeal to their self-interest. No need to study individual temperament to discover that, madam; that's a motive that appeals to all humanity, and saves endless trouble."

"And have you found it invariably successful?" demanded the lady, with a coolness which rather took him aback.

He had expected, perhaps, surprise at his heretical doctrine—depreciation of it—an urging of the superiority of modern ideas. This demand for a practical illustration of results was rather embarrassing. He hesitated.

"You tell me you have found that to be your son Evelyn's disposition?" she calmly interrogated. "You give me to understand that, with him, no motive is so powerful as self-interest—that he will do anything, however unwillingly, sooner than lose his inheritance?"

"I can't exactly say that—no," was the chagrined answer. "But that is just what I complain of. With any ordinary man it would answer perfectly, it must! With any healthy, rational disposition. Your son Tom, for instance; dock his allowance, I'd undertake to drive him with no other curb. But Evelyn—such an unfortunate, dogged, obstinate young rebel! I grow warm, and you must excuse me, Mrs. Saxon, but this is a subject that touches me nearly. Why, modern people seem to me to have the most contorted ideas. Self-interest, you talk of, as if that

were such an ignoble thing. I deny it. A man is bound to take an interest in himself, a proper pride in his position. Doesn't disinheritance mean disgrace? Tell me that. Of course it does. A man's father doesn't cast him off for nothing, and it is a stigma he will carry to his grave. The young man who is not influenced by such a threat is abnormal, unnatural, I say."

Mrs. Saxon was silent for some minutes, finding herself in the puzzling position of having so much to say in answer to this strange doctrine, that she scarcely knew where to begin. At last she decided that, as Mr. Westmorland had evidently some definite sore point which occupied all his thoughts, while she was arguing merely on general grounds, it might be as well to find out more of his grievance, if possible.

"Is there, then, some definite request of yours which the Major has refused?" asked she.

"There is," was the brief answer.

"I am very sorry to hear it."

Mr. Westmorland fidgeted about in an uneasy silence for a few minutes, while the carriage bowled swiftly on through the somewhat uneventful country round Norchester. At last,

"I know you like frankness," he said, "and I may as well tell you what it is. You will scarcely think the one demand I make of my only son unreasonable, I think. I ask him to marry; merely that. I do not say, marry this lady, or that lady. I do not limit his choice in any way, I simply ask him to do his obvious duty as sole representative of a very old family. There you have my trouble."

"Does Major Westmorland decline to marry?"

"Absolutely."

"Giving no reasons?"

"Merely that of disinclination."

The lady mused a moment or so.

"Does he give you to understand that he intends never to change his mind?"

"Well, no, hardly that, but——"

"Oh, then of course it is only a question of time," she broke in, with a relieved smile. "You cannot expect a young man to settle at any exactly given date, can you?"

Her guest winced, reddened, and paled. In his eye shone an uneasy gleam. Watching him she wondered what lay under the surface. She was satisfied that she had not heard all.

"I think my son has had rope enough, Mrs. Saxon. Had I insisted on his marrying ten years ago, it might have been arbitrary; but now! He is past thirty, and I have been very patient——"

"Could you not be patient a little longer? I can only imagine one thing likely to hinder a young man of your son's age and position from marrying——"

"And that is?"

"To be repeatedly urged to do it. That is a natural perversity which you cannot help. He may be quite unconscious of it himself, yet it is pretty certain that, if he thought you would much rather he did *not* marry, he would be irresistibly impelled to do so."

"Do you really think that?" eagerly, feverishly asked he.

"I do indeed. Give him to understand that you are not so anxious as you were, that you think perhaps he had better hesitate before committing himself. It will be a work of time, perhaps, but it is not necessary, I suppose, that he should marry this year or next."

"Ah, but it is!" burst from Mr. Westmorland, before he had time to command himself. "That is to say," he subjoined, nervously and hurriedly, "I am an old man, I have a—a curious presentiment. I want to live to see my daughter-in-law; to see my grandson, if Heaven so will; to be sure that the line will not end in Evelyn."

"But you are not so stricken in years, Mr. Westmorland! Come! you can scarcely urge that plea. No, no, be comforted, all will go well. In his own

good time your son will take a wife, if he is let alone. But, if you continue to urge him, you may drive him into a celibacy which, in after years he will deeply regret. Don't you see that?"

He did not answer, but by a melancholy shake of the head. He dare not tell of the superstitious terrors with which he was overwhelmed. Time! Time was slipping away with a swiftness which made him frantic. Each passing day he longed to seize, and passionately hold it fast, till Evelyn had wrung from it all the opportunities which lay dormant in its sweet summer hours. Yet day after day was he compelled to see wasted, and escaping from his powerless hands; and the year was rolling on to its end, to the dawn of that fateful year that was coming. Every now and then a paroxysm of vague terror shook him. The mania had been too long indulged. A practised doctor might have seen the dawn of incipient madness in the contracted brow and gleaming eye. Mrs. Saxon was really puzzled, she could not account for this morbid anxiety to see his son married. It must be a fad, she thought, simply a manifestation of that desire to absolutely dictate the future of their children which, in some parents, really amounts to mania. She could imagine that the Major might be annoying. There was a dogged silence about him, which would be pretty sure to grate on the nerves of a sensitive, irritable being like his father. On the other hand, the urging and goading, the perpetual fret caused by the paternal want of discrimination, was likely even to create that crust of obstinacy, certainly to increase it where it already existed. The hostess had been, to own the secret truth, a little disappointed in her younger guest, she had not thought him improved. Her remembrance of him was undoubtedly not the monosyllabic, impracticable, taciturn man he now appeared. She was now beginning to think that she had accidentally hit upon the key to the puzzle. Doubtless he was mortally afraid of Hope and Muriel, looking on both as hypothetical wives, and therefore

certain foes. The situation was really rather an amusing one! Mrs. Saxon felt guiltily inclined to laugh outright, but refrained, for fear of hurting the feelings of her companion, who certainly looked as if it were no laughing matter.

They were bowling up the avenue at Duffield by now, and just in sight of the wide lawn gaily sprinkled with parti-coloured gowns and sable clerics, and here and there with a youth in tennis-attire, forming the nucleus of a bevy of fair ones.

"Are we arrived?" said Mr. Westmorland. "I need not, I know, remind you that what I have said is in the strictest confidence."

"Of course," said she, simply, as she prepared to alight; "we will discuss the subject fully on some future occasion—we have not nearly exhausted it."

"Ah! Our young people are just behind," said Mr. Westmorland, lifting his eyeglass to survey the approaching dog-cart. "And that son of mine prefers morosely riding by himself to being in the society of two of the most charming girls I have ever met. Did you ever know such folly? Is not my vexation natural?"

"I cannot help confessing that I think his folly is natural: you really ought to know better than to make him so lamentably self-conscious, you know. But let us hope it will wear off as they know each other better."

One large, limpid pair of eyes, from the many feminine pairs assembled on the lawn, watched with intense interest the arrival of the Hesselburgh party.

Leo Forde, slim and tall, balancing her racquet in her slender fingers, was awaiting the next hour or two in painful suspense. Dick was not present. He was in charge of two critical cases, and could not make his appearance till late in the day. Now, would Major Westmorland recognise her? That was the great, the thrilling question!

Yesterday he had, apparently, never looked at her. He had lunched hastily, and escaped to the

surgery to talk business with Richard. Would he, to-day, entirely ignore her? Leo was mischievously determined to try the experiment by putting herself decisively in his way. Not that she wanted to talk to him—ill-mannered, ill-tempered man that he was—but that she longed—oh, how she longed! to be introduced to the Saxons.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. WESTMORLAND'S HOPES RISE.

I wait for my story—the birds cannot sing it,
Not one, as he sits on the tree ;
The bells cannot ring it, but long years, O bring it !
Such as I wish it to be.

JEAN INGELOW.

THE Hesselburgh party advanced into the gardens with cruel tardiness. It really was hateful of them to be so long saluting the host and hostess, introducing their guests—absolutely stopping to admire the archery prizes spread out on a table near !

Some one else besides Leo was minutely observing their progress ; Mrs. Hancock, in the celebrated purple sprigged gown, with purple complexion to match, and bright pink bonnet-strings. She was sitting enthroned under the big plane-tree, the terror of all the youths and maidens present, who had by common consent removed themselves to a safe distance ; with the one exception of Miss Forde, who, as is known, always dared the lady to do her worst.

The girl was standing purposely within earshot, and soon had the satisfaction of hearing a few comments.

“Gracious ! Is that Mrs. Saxon or her son in the

short hair, the sailor-hat, and the shirt-front? Oh, that's the lady, is it? Looks rather as if nature had made a mistake."

"One always meets such a very—ahem!—*inclusive* set at Duffield," rejoined Mrs. Shorthouse, with polite venom.

This lady's husband had only last year been promoted to the honour and glory of the Residence. She had spent the required three months in Norchester, and Mrs. Saxon had not called upon her. Consequently Mrs. Hancock had a congenial listener.

"What *are* the Saxons? In trade, I hear," she went on, with assumed indifference.

"Oh, that matters nothing nowadays. I hear that the daughter of a pork-butcher was lately selected, out of many candidates, as a governess for royalty," vindictively said the lady of the sprigged foulard.

"Indeed! It is not so in our family," with a sigh of satisfaction. "Nothing of that sort tolerated at Castle Tully."

Mrs. Shorthouse was the daughter of an Irish lawyer who had been knighted.

"I assure you I hear that in London those Saxons are received everywhere," pursued Mrs. Hancock.

"That can be easily believed. London is a sort of *pot-pourri* nowadays, where wealth is always sure of a footing. The county is the only place where the distinctions of rank are at all preserved."

Leo could bear it no longer. She turned away from the two speakers, divided between anger and amusement.

"Yes," she thought, "it is good manners, not good birth, that the Londoners admire, I believe. It is only here in Norchester that you may be as insolent as you please, provided you know who your great-grandfather was."

She looked up suddenly, to find herself face to face with her visitor of yesterday.

Evelyn remembered her at once. He was in his

heart, now that he had unburdened himself to Richard, rather ashamed of his conduct to Richard's sister. He bowed and shook hands, full of eagerness to introduce her and her brother to his father and the Saxons. Tom was close at his heels, so this introduction was at once accomplished, to the great glee of the heir of Hesselburgh, who at once took entire possession of the doctor's sister, and swept her off to tennis before the deliberate Major had found a pause in which to ask her if her brother were there.

"You know," said Tom, confidentially, "I have been wanting to know you ever since we came down."

"Have you?" said Leo, smiling, as they walked side by side over the sunny grass. "And I have wanted to know your sister and you; you both look different from the Norchester people."

"That's odd. Just what we thought about you. My mother was coming to call upon you, but now I can introduce you to her after this set."

Mrs. Hancock and Mrs. Shorthouse exchanged glances of terrible meaning, as they watched the introduction and its sequel. But the sole comment made by the former lady was,

"I thought so! Birds of a feather flock together."

"The gentleman who introduced them is a distinguished-looking man—a stranger, is he not?" said Mrs. Shorthouse, eyeing Evelyn's soldierly figure with approval.

"One of the house-party. They have a better-looking set than usual," said Mrs. Hancock, condescendingly, with an eye to Miss Merrion's slim figure.

Hope was watching all that went forward with interest. Country garden-parties were always an amusement to her; there was a subtle delight in proving the force of the nameless power she seemed to exert over the other sex, Muriel and she differed widely here. Miss Saxon, as became the daughter of such a very democratic mother, was decidedly

lofty and exclusive in her ideas. Towards those she considered her equals her manners were very simple and unassuming; but here, in a "Norchester crowd," she was silent and unbending, and most of the gentlemen were afraid to approach her. But round Hope they clustered like wasps round a honey-pot. One brought ices, another lemonade, a third held her parasol while she partook of these refreshments while the rest formed an audience around, ready to obey her lightest behest.

"Who is the very beautiful young lady who came with you?" asked Leo of Tom, "the one talking to all those people over there?"

"That? Hope Merrion, the very nicest—I mean, one of the very nicest girls in the world."

"How much everybody seems to admire her!" said Leo, regarding her attentively in a pause of the game. "I don't wonder. She has such a sweet little face."

"Such a chin, hasn't she? It's the chin does it," said Tom, sagely. "There isn't a man alive who could resist that chin."

Evelyn's father was thinking the same thing. He was annoyed, almost beyond his powers of concealment, by noting that the Major was, with few exceptions, the only young man absent from the charmed circle. A set of tennis was formed. One of the retinue ran off to the house to get Hope's racquet, and then they moved away, down to the tennis-lawn, and Mr. Westmorland followed them.

Again, as he watched her playing, surged up in his heart the desire to be young once more; to make that girl love him, to carry her off under the noses of a dozen rivals. Oh, why, why would not Evelyn do it for him?

His satisfied eye rested with delight on her every movement, his ear revelled in each cadence of her harmonious, young voice. She never flirted, never made use of her eyes, never made any effort of any kind to attract. She was quite natural and unaffected, look-

ing frankly, answering clearly, enjoying her game with the zest of a school girl.

"If I had fallen across such a woman when I was young," he thought to himself, "it would have made a different man of me. Girls have so much more in their minds, and consequently in their faces, than they used to have. One would never tire of such a woman as that. I tired of my wife. She had a strong will, but a weak intellect. In spite of her fortune I did wrong to marry her, and my punishment takes the form of my son!"

He looked resentfully round for Evelyn, and met his eyes, full. The Major approached, with an air of light-heartedness worn to conceal inward anxiety. His father was standing on the grass; the grass was damp, a cold was the inevitable result, to him, of such imprudence, but nothing infuriated him more than the merest hint in this direction. Any word which recalled, however distantly, the disabilities of advancing years, was gall and wormwood to the elderly beau. Evelyn knew this, and all his energies were at the moment centred on stratagem.

"There's a scarlet *datura* in the conservatory, 'tis worth seeing," he suggested, confidentially.

"Scarlet *datura* be hanged!" was the acrimonious reply; "here is something better worth seeing on this lawn, as you would know, if you possessed all your faculties. Look at the young lady, Miss Hope! There is grace in all her movements, grace that springs from a soul within! What a glance! what a smile! Look at that mouth! Is it solely for the purpose of exasperating me that you decline to speak to her?"

"Come a little further off, and I will answer; we might be overheard, just here," said the wily Evelyn, thinking little of the point of discussion, and greatly of his father's rheumatism.

"Overheard! when you mumble so that I can hardly hear you myself," was the irritable rejoinder.

"No, thanks: I stay here. One does not have the

chance, every day, of looking at beauty like that."

"I'm sorry I can't agree with you," said his son, sulkily.

"Agree with me! Have you ever agreed with me, on any point, ever since you were born?" sneered Mr. Westmorland. "No, no! The days are gone by, so Mrs. Saxon tells me, when a father may hope to transmit a mere fraction of his individuality to the son who is to reign after him. You and I are quite in the fashion. I believe we differ on everything."

"I'm afraid that's somewhere near true," said Evelyn, hopelessly. "But let us stroll; the wind is chilly."

"The wind? I feel no wind! You are talking nonsense; but do you really mean that you actually are incapable of seeing that Miss Merrion is, beyond question, a person to be admired?"

"I don't like her," was the dogged answer. "I will go further if you please, and add that I actually dislike her. I am indifferent about most people, but I dislike Miss Merrion."

"That is as might have been expected," returned his father, smoothly, after a pause; "and for no reason, I suppose, beyond the all-sufficient one that I think otherwise?"

"I have a reason, and it's a jolly strong one," said the Major inelegantly; "but I expect it would be mean to put it about. I shall say nothing, but it is sure to come out sooner or later. If you knew, I think even your admiration would cool; but meantime you may understand I would sooner drown myself than ask such a woman to be my wife; and the sooner you make arrangements to get out of this, the better I shall be pleased, that's all."

"Amazing!" was his bewildered father's rejoinder, spoken in soliloquy; for Evelyn was off, to secure Mrs. Saxon's influence to induce a removal from the dangerous grass.

"As it happens, I am just in want of him," said

the vigorous lady. "I am meditating an attack on the wife of the canon in residence. Your father will be a good bait."

Mrs. Shorthouse was still seated on the green bench beside Mrs. Hancock, when the two advanced upon her. What was about to happen? Every spine of the artificial rye in her bonnet quivered with suspense.

"Mrs. Shorthouse, I believe? Will you allow me to introduce myself? I am Mrs. Saxon. I have been looking for an opportunity to make your acquaintance, but in the summer I am a bad caller. I wonder if you would so far waive the formalities as to give us the pleasure of your company at dinner at Hesselburgh?"

Excitement made Mrs. Shorthouse positively purple. She was obliged to clear her throat before answering, and found herself, with a weak smile, murmuring something about "most happy," regardless of the start and snort of the purple-sprigged foulard at her side.

"I am so anxious to meet Canon Shorthouse," went on Mrs. Saxon, using to its fullest effect the one personal charm which she possessed—a melodious voice and most refined manner of speaking. "I hear he is an antiquary, so I felt sure he would like to meet Mr. Westmorland. Let me introduce Mr. Westmorland—a very old friend. He is staying with us, and I want to get up a small dinner-party, but will not fix the date until I know your engagements."

The enemy was completely disarmed. The invader took the vacant seat on the green bench, Mr. Westmorland contributed a few courtly nothings, a date was fixed, and Mrs. Saxon could feel that she had done her duty and just saved her unaccountable neglect of the Shorthouses from being any longer the theme of every tea-party of the cathedral clique.

"The etiquette of this place is too much for me," she remarked, with a sigh, as they moved off. "I generally have to get little Mrs. Copeland to help me arrange my table. She knows the ins and outs of

things. Once upon a time I got into terrible trouble. I put Major Dickens above Captain Harris, a naval captain. I thought that must be right, but the Harrises cut us afterwards, and I discovered that his father was a baron ! Dire, was it not ? Mrs. Copeland, I believe, knows all the pedigrees. Her husband is Athelstan's agent, so she is a great comfort. Until we came to Hesselburgh, I fancied such things belonged to the Jane Austen period, but *experientia docet* ! ”

Tom came dancing up.

“ I say, *mater*, haven't you got an aboriginal dinner coming off next week ? Well, invite Miss Forde and her brother, just to take the taste out—won't you ? She's such a stunning little thing, I want to introduce her. You know,”—with a laugh to Mr. Westmorland—“ the major went to lunch with her on his way up to Hesselburgh yesterday. And I'm not surprised, I tell you.”

Mr. Westmorland's whole face changed, suddenly, lighted up, became radiant.

“ Eh ?—eh ? ” he exclaimed, genially. “ What's that you say ? Miss Forde ? Pretty, is she ? I crave the honour of an introduction ! Where is she ? ”

“ She's sitting on that seat, over there—that slim girl in pink,” said Tom, eagerly.

Mr. Westmorland's glasses went up, and he critically surveyed the pliant, graceful form of Leo, sunk back with a pretty touch of lassitude in a big wicker-chair. The glowing, hopeful youth in her was most attractive. A different style from Miss Merrion : more rudimentary, but in its way quite as attractive.

“ Just the creature to fascinate a morose clod like Evelyn,” reflected the fond parent. “ I shall certainly not complain, if this be his choice.”

The gloom which had rested on his spirits was all gone. He thought he understood his son at last. Ah, how much now hung upon his own discretion ! He made a heroic resolve. No hint of what he knew should cross his lips. He would not interfere—would not spoil the sport. Evelyn, for once, should

positively be allowed to do his own wooing. But, meanwhile, to speak to this blithe young divinity—to ascertain if the sound of her was as satisfactory as the sight of her :

“A nymph—a positive nymph !” he said to Tom.
“I must be presented at once.”

CHAPTER X.

MOLLIE.

Seigneur, préservez-moi—préservez ceux que j'aime,
Parents, amis, et mes ennemis même
Dans le mal triomphant,
De jamais voir, seigneur, l'été sans fleurs vermeilles,
La cage sans oiseau, la ruche sans abeilles,
La maison sans enfants !

VICTOR HUGO.

“AND so, Miss Forde, you keep house for your brother, I hear?” said the handsome old man, seating himself by Leo. “Poor fellow, how I pity him !”

“You are not very polite,” laughed Leo.

“Ah ! but you don't hear me out. You don't ask why he is to be pitied. Now, I'll tell you : because he will be so soon called upon to lose you. Eh ?”

She really did not understand him.

“I am not going away,” she said.

“Ah ! ah ! Don't be too positive, my child—not in this world ! How do you know that somebody else's brother may not want his house kept—eh ? We all know how weak are the claims of one's own brothers, compared with those of other people. Isn't that so ?”

She blushed beautifully.

“Oh, but I could never leave Dick !”

“Quite so—quite so ! The only way to solve that would be to make Dick give you away, would it

not? And so my boy lunched with you yesterday, I hear?"

"You are very like him," remarked Leo, raising her limpid eyes to his face.

"Like him, am I? What a poor hand at compliments—eh? Dear! what a pair of us! And he is a friend of Dick's?"

"Yes, Dick likes him very much," said Leo, sorely tempted to add that she did not at all agree with Dick on this point; but politeness, of course, forbade such uncomplimentary frankness, and Mr. Westmorland smiled on in happy ignorance of the methods of rendering himself agreeable employed by Evelyn yesterday.

"And how do you like this housekeeping—eh, Miss Forde?"

"I like it very much. It is great fun. I like living with Dick, and Norchester is such a queer place. I mean, the people are so queer: there is something to make you laugh all day long. Do you see that very stout lady in the purple gown all over little bunches of flowers? She is the funniest of all. She thinks I am a very naughty girl, but I can't help it. She says young ladies ought not to do all kinds of things which seem very harmless to Dick and me; but I was not made on her pattern. I was cut out differently, and, if any one tried to alter me now, I am afraid they would only spoil me or pull me out of shape. What do you think?"

"That you are a young lady of much penetration. Do not let the purple lady metamorphose you in any way. Be yourself, and you cannot fail to please."

"Why, here comes Dick," said Leo, frankly, "with Major Westmorland! I did not know that Dick had arrived on the scene."

Evelyn's father looked up, and saw his son approaching with evident and eager intention of introducing him to the sensible-looking, square-shouldered young man who accompanied him. Actually there was a smile on the Major's usually serious counte-

nance—he looked positively animated. His father could scarcely believe his eyes. High beat his heart, rosy grew the world's aspect to him. There could be but one reason for Evelyn's eagerness to come to Hesselburgh, for his excursion to Minstergate yesterday, for his sociability to-day ! But one reason : the pretty, *naïve* one now seated at his side. How could he guess that the medical brother, and not the attractive sister, had been the lure ? Had such a reason been given him, he could not have understood it. In his eyes, when young men became in the least "keen" about anything, or when any part of their conduct seemed in the slightest degree unexplained, there was always a woman in the background. One strong reason for his disquietude about his heir's non-matrimonial tendencies had been the fear of some discreditable attachment behind the scenes—some entanglement which he was too obstinate to confess. So little could he understand even the broad lines of the character of his only son.

But now the answer to the whole conundrum was before him ; and such a pleasing answer ! He could have embraced Leo ; he felt he loved her. Vague ideas of presenting her with jewellery floated through his mind, so perfectly competent did he feel himself to conduct all the details of this wooing which his son, if left to himself, was sure to spoil by some piece of incredible folly, backwardness, or bashfulness.

However, he had made a covenant with himself that Evelyn should at least attempt the siege on his own account ; and, determined to adhere to this noble resolution, he made his smile not too broad as the young man said :

"Father, I am anxious you should know my friend Forde."

"Having had the honour of being already presented to Miss Forde, it will be readily understood that the idea of knowing any of her family gives me the greatest pleasure," he said, in his pleasant, half-ironical tones.

Leo admired him intensely, and thought his manners like those of Sir Walter Elliot in "Persuasion," with a dash of the benevolence of Mr. Woodhouse in "Emma."

A few words passed, explanatory of the former acquaintance of the young men, and then the doctor deliberately took his seat at Mr. Westmorland's side and asked him if he were interested in the report of the medical congress published in that morning's *Times*.

Mr. Westmorland was a great newspaper reader, and ready to discuss any current topic of the day. They fell into conversation in the most promising way, and Evelyn, exulting in his own diplomacy, was just wondering how to make himself scarce when his eye fell on Leo. The brilliant thought of asking her to play tennis struck him; he owed her some reparation for his rudeness of yesterday, and it would leave the coast clear for Dick.

The young lady accepted somewhat haughtily, recent slights being fresh in her mind. Mr. Westmorland had much ado to conceal his surprise and delight on seeing them walk off together.

"Charming young creature! charming! Your sister, sir," he could not refrain from saying. "Young ladies are so charming nowadays, a higher form of organism altogether, than they used to be. Every feeling alive, every faculty trained. Educated, body and mind, literature, and the gymnasium! It makes their charms more subtle, and more potent."

"Yes," said Dick, "I think it does. Seriously, I believe that an English girl of to-day has the chance of being about as complete a being as has been yet known, if she understands how to use her opportunities."

His eyes were on Muriel Saxon, who was seated near, talking languidly to an uninteresting minor canon whose one topic was church music.

"I think," he went on, "that, in our days, fine health adds to a girl's beauty. It is the gymnasium,

as you say, sir. The time has gone by, when a faded aspect and a tottering step were the great attractions. Look at Miss Saxon now, a case in point. Feminine and graceful ! But you should have seen her playing in the tennis-tournament ! accurate eye, steady wrist ! It's a beautiful combination ! ”

Mr. Westmorland assented with a sigh.

“It's a daily wonder to me,” he said, “how any of you young men keep single, in face of such temptation.”

The young doctor replied, with his eyes still on Miss Saxon.

“Young ladies are more particular, nowadays, you know.”

“Ah !” agreed his companion, with a sudden access of apprehension.

That was very likely so, and it frightened him, for he was totally unable to see in what possible way his son could render himself attractive to a girl of the type under discussion. He looked across the gardens. Evelyn and Leo were playing together. The now sinking sun threw their shadows long on the golden grass behind them. The ball rose dark into the clear atmosphere, hovered against a background of amber sky, and fell. Leo tried, missed it, stooped and cried “Take it !” to Evelyn, who, playing delicately over her head, “placed” the ball too successfully for his adversary, and Miss Forde triumphantly announced :

“Our game !”

“One love, love one !” remarked Evelyn, tossing, the balls into the other courts.

“The language of tennis sounds somewhat suggestive to an outsider,” smiled his father.

Dick laughed.

“That subject has been worn threadbare, I am afraid,” he said ; and leaned back, looking at Muriel and feeling the calm of the summer evening in his soul.

“The Major is a fine soldier,” he remarked, pres-

ently, letting his gaze travel to Evelyn's stalwart figure.

"Ay, a good soldier, but a bad lover," said Mr. Westmorland, though with more approval in his tones than was usual with him when speaking of his thorn in the flesh. "Why doesn't he marry now?"

Dick saw his chance.

"I suppose with such a fine estate, his marriage is a matter of some importance," he said with a professional eye upon his patient.

"Eh?" said Mr. Westmorland, dreamily, shading his eyes from the dazzle. "Oh, he must take his time, you know, he must take his time about that. He'll come to it sooner or later. They all come to it. No use to be in a hurry."

This was most amazing. For a minute Dick was stupefied. Westmorland had said to him,

"You have only to touch the sore point ever so distantly, and you will see the cloven hoof."

He could not understand it. Of the combined effects of Mrs. Saxon's advice that afternoon, and Leo's appearance on the scene, he could of course know nothing. The result was extremely perplexing. It almost seemed, as if it were, after all, the son, and not the father, who laboured under a mental disorder.

"What was Westmorland thinking about?" he wondered, perplexedly, "what a queer fellow he is!"

And then his thoughts wandered gradually away from the old man at his side, back to Muriel Saxon; and there eyes, brain, and heart rested, long and steadily, till the longing grew too great to be further repressed, and, turning to Mr. Westmorland, he asked in a straightforward, manly way,

"Would you introduce me to Miss Saxon? I should esteem it a great favour."

"Certainly—oh, certainly!" No civility could be reckoned too great to show to Leo's brother. They rose, and walked together over the sunny lawn.

Muriel saw them coming, and advanced to meet

them. She was but too glad to escape from the minor canon, and favoured Richard with a slow, sweet smile, not the conventional one which she reserved for the Norchester natives.

A few commonplaces passed between the trio : at least, to Mr. Westmorland they were commonplaces. Forde, however, was standing at Heaven's gate, and the monotonous cadence of Miss Saxon's flute-like voice was to him the harmony of angels ; for the young doctor was in love, for the first time, and had taken the complaint severely. Muriel, studying him, thought that he seemed handsomer than her previous casual sights of him had led her to suppose. She was wrong. The fact was that he really had grown handsomer than formerly : a new light beamed in his steady eyes, and a softness relaxed the sensible lines of his mouth. This garden was the garden of Eden, and life took on new hues of beauty and variety.

Suddenly Muriel broke into a small remark of Mr. Westmorland's with a slight exclamation of pleasure, her face kindled up, and Richard turned to follow the direction of her eyes. He saw Mrs. Saxon advancing towards them, a broad smile of pleasure on her large features, and beside her a little, shrivelled-looking elderly gentleman in a grey felt wide-awake and spectacles, and carrying a large white umbrella, lined with green.

"Cousin Mollie !" said Muriel, a great deal of delight infused into her soft tones ; and, if ever the doctor envied anybody in his life, it was the quaint little gentleman in blue spectacles, as Miss Saxon took his brown paw in both her hands, and said, with as much emphasis as her nature admitted of,

"I'm simply delighted to see you, dear !"

The gentleman so addressed seemed fully as happy as she in the meeting. He smiled and nodded, and let her hold his hand, and presently said, in a funny little cracked voice,

"Yes, I came over, came over to-day. Thought

it was time I saw something of you all! Thomas saw me first! He grows a fine boy, doesn't he? Clapped me on the back till he made me cough, Murie! Plenty of muscle, eh? Plenty! He'll turn Leaming out of windows, when he's master there, eh?" and the genial little man laughed till the tears came, and brought out a large crimson handkerchief which he applied to his forehead.

Meanwhile the said Thomas was ravaging the gardens like a whirlwind in search of Hope; he found her in one of the palm-houses, making havoc of the heart of a susceptible deacon from a neighbouring church, who glared savagely at the intruder.

Naught cared Tom; he unceremoniously caught Miss Merrion's hand, snatched up her parasol, and panted out, in short, quick gasps,

"Come on . . . quick! . . . Cousin . . . Mollie's . . . turned up! . . . Come on, I tell you!"

She uttered a little cry of gladness.

"Oh, Tom, how nice! You didn't expect him, did you? Excuse me, please," to the offended cleric, "I must run away at once!" and, so saying, they were off.

Cousin Mollie, otherwise the Honourable Molyneux Lyster, was the embodiment, to the young Saxons, of everything that was delightful, and undisciplined, and ideal. He lived all alone, in the very heart of the moors, on a small estate which had been left him by a distant relation. He was a junior member of a titled family, and years ago had buried every hope in the grave of his young wife. Just one year of married happiness had been his, and then he laid her to rest, with their tiny son on her breast, in the lonely churchyard of Leaming-le-Moor. The unexpected legacy of the manor had enabled him to marry this, his first and only love; when she died, all his youth, his aspirations, his very life seemed crushed out of him. He lived on, his lonely days, in his isolated home, caring for nobody, interested in nothing save his weekly visit to the churchyard where his heart

and treasure lay together, and his Sunday church-going, when he could look at the marble monument he had caused to be erected to their memory.

He had existed in this morbid way for about ten years when his second cousin, Athelstan Saxon, married, and brought his bride, in the course of honeymoon wanderings, to stop a night in the moorland manor.

Mrs. Saxon was at once touched with deepest pity of the forlorn condition of the widower; but her vigorous, and perhaps too straightforward hand, was powerless to break the crust of chillness and apathy which hid the genial heart. She could not forget him, however, and never let a year go by without making a fruitless effort to coax him out of his solitude.

At last she hit, almost by accident, on the spring which unlocked his heart. After four years, and when Muriel was nearly three years old, Master Tom appeared on the scenes. She wrote and asked Mr. Lyster to be godfather.

To her great astonishment, he consented; nay, still more wondrous, he came to Hesselburgh for the baptism. He brought silver gifts of the most sumptuous description for Thomas Molyneux Lyster Saxon. He was enchanted with the little brown baby, and held it on his knees, seemingly spellbound as it unconsciously clasped his finger in its velvety touch; he was almost equally delighted with the little golden-haired Muriel, who came and nestled against his knee, half-jealous of the consequence and state of the new baby brother.

The prematurely old and bowed figure of the recluse, was to be seen moving round the garden with the bonny girl in his arms, who plucked flowers, and tried with gravity and much labour to fasten them in his coat. He seemed lost in a dream of bliss when she cuddled his neck—so long unused to the divine touches of love—with her fat white arms.

Mrs. Saxon went out to him after a while, and

courteously begged that he would not tease himself too much with the child. He tightened his clasp about her, and bright drops swam in his eyes, as he said, wistfully,

“Don’t take her from me ; she’s—she’s quite happy, I believe ; she don’t want to leave Mollie, do you, little woman ?”

“Don’t want to leave Mollie,” echoed the little one, jovially ; whereupon he timidly kissed her, and she returned his kisses with interest. He looked so exceedingly funny, decked out to Muriel’s taste, with dandelions waving in his hat, and a daisy-chain about his neck ; altogether so Ophelia like in appearance that Mrs. Saxon felt inclined to laugh and cry both at once.

She did cry in earnest before the day was out. After dinner, and only one cigar, the confirmed smoker begged permission to go and see the children in bed. Mr. Saxon took him there, unknown to his wife, who, proceeding to the nursery half-an-hour later, found her visitor seated by Tom’s cradle, embracing the head of it, and gazing rapt at the sleeping baby. He looked up, as she entered, with a quivering, appealing smile.

“I’m not disturbing him,” he said, pleadingly. “He’s sound asleep. You see, it makes me think so of my own little chap—how he might have looked in his sleep. He is so warm, this little fellow—alive and warm ; I never kissed mine till he was cold ;” and then two great tears from the desolate father’s eyes fell audibly on little Tom’s blue-silk quilt. “I feel as if I couldn’t bear to leave him,” he said, sobbingly.

The usually unemotional woman knelt down and kissed the worn, quivering face.

“The boy is partly yours,” she said, weeping ; “you shall always see as much of him as ever you please. Our home is open to you whenever you care to come, and your room shall always be ready.”

So it had been ever since. The next year both

children went, with their nurses, to stay at Leaming while their parents were abroad ; and after this, a visit from them, once a year, became a settled thing. The old grey, solitary house echoed children's shouts and children's laughter, as years ago the young husband and wife had, with tender smiles and beating hearts, hoped that it would. One of Muriel's earliest recollections was of being held up in Cousin Mollie's arms to kiss the marble lips of the monumental mother, who, with her baby in her arms, was stepping barefoot into the waves of a marble ocean.

What cared these two healthy and jocund young persons for sad memories or sacred associations? They romped and quarrelled, played and enjoyed themselves more blithely in the old house on the moors than anywhere else in the world.

Hope had often heard of this beloved Cousin Mollie, but had never beheld him. Thus it was that his sudden arrival on the scene was to her quite as exciting as it was to Tom, and she ran over the smooth lawns in undignified haste that was most shocking to Mrs. Hancock.

CHAPTER XI.

I WANT TO TAKE YOU ALL BACK WITH ME.

And to the lone recluse, whate'er
They brought—each visiting,
Was like the crowding of the year
With a new burst of spring.

WORDSWORTH.

"Ah, here he comes ! Where was he off too ?" said Mr. Lyster, in tones of great satisfaction, as Tom and Hope came up.

"I went to fetch Miss Merrion, you know ; I've told you about her in letters," said Tom, panting.
"I want to introduce you."

Perhaps Hope was a little disappointed in Cousin Mollie's outward man. She knew his romance, of course, but it was hard to connect romance with the little smiling, heated, ill-dressed gentleman before her. In his best days he could never have been handsome; and Hope as yet knew nothing of that love which absolutely creates beauty in the beloved object. There was, however, no resisting the shy cordiality of his manner; and, before she had been five minutes talking to him, she quite understood the devotion of the two young Saxons.

Very soon a move was made—the party must be making their farewells.

Richard, who had been quite crowded out by the sudden arrival of this popular person, was preparing to step back and retire when Mrs. Saxon stopped him and to his untold delight, asked him to bring his sister to dinner on the following Wednesday. He accepted the invitation with a great fear lest his manner of doing so had been too marked—too emphatic. Here was an unexpected pleasure—something to look forward to! The dazzle of the sinking sun turned all the world to glory.

Leo and Major Westmorland came across the grass together from their tennis: Evelyn was looking quite animated and Leo's cheeks were like carnations.

"We won, Dick," cried she, delightedly, "we won!"

"A very good set," said the Major; "your sister plays capitally, Forde."

"She does indeed! Mr. Forde and I had the pleasure of watching her," said Mr. Westmorland, hardly able to contain himself for delight.

"I do so like tennis," said Leo, with all her heart, smiling up at her late partner, with whom she was now quite on friendly terms.

"If you could manage to send up an evening dress you had better come in time for some tennis on Wednesday," said Mrs. Saxon.

The girl looked puzzled.

"Mrs. Saxon has asked me to bring you to dine at Hesselburgh," explained her brother.

"Has she?" cried Leo. "Oh, how *awfully* kind of her!"

Then, as the smile grew broader on all the faces round, she added, with a charming colour.

"I ought not to have said 'awfully,' ought I?"

"My dear," said Mr. Westmorland, indulgently, "some people may say anything they please."

"You will turn my little girl's head, sir," smiled Dick.

"I should like to turn it," was the gallant response, "so that it would look always in my direction."

So saying, with a courtly bow, he took leave, and followed the rest of the party.

"You have enjoyed your afternoon, father," said Evelyn, giving him his arm.

"I have enjoyed myself, Evelyn, very much, considerably more than I expected. Don't know when I have had such a pleasant afternoon."

There was no *tête-à-tête* between him and Mrs. Saxon on the way home, for the three young people turned their father out of the cart in order to have Mollie amongst them.

Perhaps it was as well; for, in Mr. Westmorland's present elated state of mind, he must have spoken of Leo, and he did not wish to do so, not till he had made assurance doubly sure.

Meanwhile the cart was bowling swiftly along, Cousin Mollie driving with Muriel at his side, Hope and Tom behind.

"I suppose you know," he said, when all the horses and dogs at Leaming had been duly inquired for, and the health of Mrs. Abbott, the housekeeper, ascertained to be excellent. "I suppose you know what I came here for."

"Oh, of course; to see me," said Muriel.

"That, naturally, my darling, but not that only. I want to take you all back with me."

"Hooray!" shouted Tom, causing the nervous

mare to break into a gallop, and nearly shooting out Hope behind.

"Tom, you dreadful boy ! You nearly killed me !" she cried.

"Well, you couldn't fall out, if you would allow me to put my arm round your waist as I am always offering to do."

"Tom, don't be vulgar. Does Mr. Lyster mean to invite me too, to Leaming?"

"Of course he does ; don't you, Mollie?"

"Most certainly, if Miss Hope cares to come ; well, do you think it can be managed?"

"No," said Muriel, mournfully, "I don't think the *mater* will let us come, not to leave Major Westmorland."

"Oh, rubbish, Muriel !" cried Tom. "He doesn't count as a young one ; he never comes near us, or joins in any way, he won't even drive in the cart."

"Dear me, what an incomprehensible young man !" said Cousin Mollie.

"Well, I know *mater* won't let us all go away and leave him," maintained Muriel. "Besides," she added, in melancholy tones, "there is this horrid Woman's Sanitary League, we must be home for that."

"He'll spoil all the fun ! a great wet blanket !" said Tom, angrily ; "and, as to that Sanitary League, it's a blooming nuisance."

Poor Hope felt, like Jonah, inclined to entreat them to leave her out of the plan, and then the Major would join himself once more to their revels ; yet pride forbade. Why should she exclude herself from such simple, delightful pleasure, just because he chose to sulk ? What did she care for his black looks and chilling silence ?

"Tom," said she, "let us put up with Major Westmorland's vagaries rather than lose the chance of a visit to Leaming."

"Bless me," said Mollie, "he'll be all right ! Bound to be sociable when he finds himself shut up with you three young people. What do you say—

hey? Let's carry him off to our fastness on the moorland, and convert him by force into a good comrade; shall we?"

"A very good idea!" laughed Hope, softly.

"I believe you want him to come," said Tom, sulkily. "I'm not going if you mean to leave me out in the cold."

"My dear good boy," she said, mischievously, "I hardly think the Major shows much desire to compete for my society. You ought to bless him for his surliness. If he were charming, you know, I might—it is just barely possible that I *might*—prefer him to you."

"Oh, false one! You'd better!" was the young man's fierce threat. "Yes, Moll, old boy, have Westmorland; he'll just suit."

"Perhaps he won't come," suggested Muriel.

"I should think it's very likely," said Hope.

"Then *mater* won't let us come; so do be very civil to him, all of you, so as to make him think we want him," urged Muriel. "I think, you know, that perhaps we three do clique too much, and make jokes that he doesn't understand. It's all right with Mollie, because he understands us—don't you, dear? But the Major doesn't, and I think we ought to be careful."

It was so seldom that Miss Saxon delivered so lengthy an opinion that her audience were somewhat impressed, though of course too proud to show it; and a short silence ensued before Cousin Mollie remarked,

"The Wetherells have been in trouble since last winter, you will be sorry to hear, Murie."

"Who are the Wetherells?" asked Hope, in a low voice, of Tom.

"Vicar and vicaress of Leaming-le-Moor," he replied. "Queer old pair. Sorry they've been up a tree, Mollie. What was it?"

"You remember their niece?"

Muriel laughed in an amused way.

"I should think so! We heard of her often, but

never saw her. We always called her Jane Fairfax," she explained to Hope. "Do you remember how, whenever Emma Woodhouse called on the Bates' they always read Jane Fairfax's last letter out loud to her? Well, the Wetherells always did that. This beloved niece of theirs was governess in some wealthy family who were always travelling abroad."

"The poor old dears thought that Nellie's account of her travels ought to be published," laughed Tom. "She wrote most awful long-winded stories of all that she had done and seen. She is a good sort of girl, I should think, but a most fearful bore."

"She is dead, Tom," said Cousin Mollie, sadly.

"Dead!" The boy's gaiety was sobered at once. "Oh! I am so sorry," he said, honestly. "How fearfully rough on those poor old souls."

"She was a good girl, and a brave girl," said their cousin, "dutiful and affectionate; and she was all they had to care for. I scarcely thought that Mrs. Wetherell would survive it. It was a pitiful thing. Just after you two left me in January, they had a letter saying that the Fothergills were in England——"

Hope turned with a queer start, and bent her startled eyes on the narrator.

"The Fothergills were the people she travelled with," said Tom, thinking she required an explanation.

"Just so," went on Mr. Lyster; "well, they were in England, and thought Nellie so poorly that they were sending her to her uncle and aunt for a long stay till she was quite recovered. When she came, about the middle of February, I was horrified at her wan looks. She seemed so strangely altered, changed, and broken down. She had a cough, too, that sounded ominous. I sent for Rider, from Liverpool——"

"Just like you," murmured Muriel.

"My dearie, one did all one could. He seemed puzzled—said there was so little vitality. There were the seeds of a decline, but no more than a healthy girl, in a pure mountain air, ought to throw off, with

care ; but there seemed no elasticity—no effort. I told him to come again in a month. Meanwhile, I sent her champagne, and such-like rubbish, and got her a horse, thinking that riding might be beneficial. But she seemed to have no energy for anything—riding, especially, seemed only to distress and exhaust her. The weather was bad, and gradually she kept the house more. When Rider next came, he was petrified—said he had never in his life seen the disease make such ravages in so short a time. Unless something gave her a fresh start, he said, nothing could save her. I suggested taking her away south, and he thought it a good idea ; but nothing would persuade her to go. She said she felt happier there, and we thought it best to humour her ; but she just faded out of life quietly, and died on the 1st of May. It was very terrible to see her dying daily. She grew so weak that the slightest noise startled her like a cannon-shot. I have seen her spring up, and grow red and pale because the postman passed the window.”

“Poor Mr. and Mrs. Wetherell !” said Muriel, compassionately.

Hope looked away, over the cornfields, that the occupants of the cart might not see that her eyes were brimming with tears. Her sympathies, it seemed, were easily stirred.

The story subdued all their spirits, and only quiet remarks concerning the dead girl and her loss were heard, until, in the early twilight, they drove into the stable-yard. The men came round in great pleasure, grinning to see Mr. Lyster, who had a genial little speech for all of them.

Just as they were alighted, the Major, who had lingered for a little talk with Dick Forde, rode into the yard. His spirits were good, for his father’s speech concerning his matrimonial arrangements had been repeated to him, and he was rejoicing over the happy change. He remained chatting in the dusk, after he had dismounted, watching Hope, who had pulled down some of the broad chestnut-leaf fans which hung

over the red wall, and was decking Maidenhair's head with them. Tom, behind her, was tickling her neck with a straw, to try to make her laugh, and asking why she was in the dumps.

"I am thinking about that girl—that Nellie, who died, out on the moors," she said. "It has made me suddenly feel how terribly sad life is, Tom dear. And this is the time of day to feel sad, too. The sun is gone, the wind is hushed, everything is grey, sober, and dim. There is something depressing in the very ring of the men's feet on the stones, in the clink of Jane's pans in the dairy and the lowing of the cows, as if they were afraid of the dark. The colour has gone out of the sky and the trees; and it was so bright an hour ago. Our very voices echo sadly, and our faces look white. I know that soon the dressing-bell will ring, and we shall go indoors, and all the lamps will be lit, and the curtains drawn, and there will be clatter of plates and glass and silver, and comforting suggestions of dinner, and I shall laugh at myself; but now it is Borderland—neither to-day nor this evening, and I feel dreary, Tom—dreary."

"Oh, my duckie, don't talk like that, or I shall want to hug you!" cried Tom, sympathetically, drawing her arm through his, "Come along in—you are chilly."

"Yes; but, Tom," she said, hanging back, as if loth to join the trio in the gateway, "wasn't it a sad story? I half wish I had not heard it. Fancy dying like that, all alone, in that desolate place, just because you had nothing to live for: when you need not have died, only that death seemed easier than life. Oh, Tom dear, isn't that dreadful? I don't know what it can be like not to care to live."

"Do you suppose she was not happy?" asked the boy in an awe-struck way.

"Happy? Would a happy woman let her life slip through her fingers like that? Why, Tom, do you know, the craving for life, the mere animal instinct of self-preservation, is the *very last thing* one parts

from ! Think what she must have suffered before she gave it up ! ”

“ Poor girl,” he said, touched and softened by his sunny Hope’s unwonted earnestness.

“ I feel,” said she, with a little shiver, as she moved onwards, “ I feel as if I want to go and see that girl’s grave.”

CHAPTER XII.

LEO GOES INTO HIGH SOCIETY.

And that same voice, my soul hears, as a bird
The fowler’s note, and follows to the snare !

ROBERT BROWNING.

COUSIN MOLLIE did not carry his point without a struggle. Mrs. Saxon was not quite willing to have all the life swept out of the house just at this time. The neighbourhood was bristling with tennis-parties and picnics, and it seemed a pity for the young folks to miss all these. She scarcely knew what made them so wild to go.

“ For, after all,” as she said to her husband, “ it is dull there, you know. The shooting is good, no doubt, but they get as much as they want here, and I am sure even Molyneux can scarcely allow them more liberty than we do. When they were children, it was easily understood ; the wall-fruit, the bee-hives, the dining late, the general petting. But, now they are grown up, I should imagine the society round here had more charms ; yet Tom seems perfectly ready to abandon even Miss Forde for the sake of a week at Leaming. One never gets to the bottom, even of one’s own children.”

“ It is old association, I expect,” said little Mr. Saxon, benignly. “ Going to stay with Molyneux has always been the greatest treat in their catalogue, and

force of habit makes it so still. It seems a harmless taste, my dear, and I think we may safely encourage it."

"I believe you are right, Athelstan, you so often are; what should I do without you?" which praise the modest little man at once disclaimed, in his usual formula.

"What sense I have I owe to my wife."

"At any rate, they cannot go till after the dinner-party on Wednesday, and Molyneux must stay for that, and they must be back in time for the hygienic meeting," was the lady's ultimatum.

Mollie had no objection. So completely had that ruling spirit, Thomas, dominated his nature, that the shy, sensitive man, who, eighteen years ago, winced at a strange glance, and walked in bye-lanes to avoid the chance passer-by on the forlorn moorland high-road, now contemplated with calmness that unutterable event, a cathedral dinner-party.

The first few days of his stay at Hesselburgh were gloriously fine and hot, so much so, that everybody was out of doors all day, and Evelyn and Hope had no difficulty in ignoring one another completely, without attracting any attention.

In fact, all the gentlemen were shooting the whole of Friday and Saturday, and after dinner, there was coffee in the garden, all the sportsmen too tired for much beyond languid and blissful enjoyment of their smoke, and an early retirement to prepare them for to-morrow's tramp.

On Sunday, the whole party bore down on the Minster in great state, and Leo's delight was considerable at being bowed to, and shaken hands with after service in face of Mrs. Hancock and all her following.

Tom asked Richard Forde to shoot with them the following day, and, as he thought he might feel himself justified in taking the afternoon, Muriel suggested that he should bring Leo to Hesselburgh after lunch and leave her to their care. Mrs. Saxon completed

the feasibility of the plan, by volunteering to send the carriage to fetch the brother and sister, and, when all was settled, it was hard to tell whose sensations of pleasure were keener—Leo's or Mr. Westmorland's.

That evening, however, the weather changed, becoming chilly and threatening. Monday morning brought a grey drizzle, and Tom and Evelyn, after being out all the morning, and getting wet through, came home to lunch, quite determined not to repeat the experiment that day. The drizzle now changed to a downpour, and chances of further sport were rendered entirely out of the question.

"Never mind, darling," said Tom to Hope, "we'll enjoy ourselves in spite of the weather. We'll have a kitchen tea-party. Mollie loves them, and cookie shall give us grouse stewed in mushrooms. I am sure Miss Forde will like that."

"Tom!" said Muriel, "you cannot possibly ask Dr. Forde to a kitchen tea-party the very first time he comes to the house."

"Then you shall give five o'clock tea in your sitting-room, *tête-à-tête*, while Mollie and Hope, and Miss Leo, and I, enjoy ourselves below."

"I believe Dr. Forde will quite appreciate our rustic simplicity," said Hope, reflectively. "He has an interesting face—a face with many capabilities in it."

"Oh, has he, miss? Then he shan't come," snapped Tom.

"Tom, I think you are unreasonable; I might quite as fairly object to the presence of his fascinating sister: you are forgetting our compact."

"What is the compact?" asked Mr. Lyster, with interest.

"Why, Mollie, I told you all about it," said Tom, with that perfect seriousness of manner which always annoyed and baffled Mr. Westmorland. "I told you that Hope has promised to marry me in ten years from now, provided neither of us has, in that time, discovered any one we like better."

"Perfect liberty on both sides to marry any one else in the meantime," corrected Hope, likewise with complete gravity.

"An excellent plan," said Mollie, with an immediate adoption of their tone and manner. "I hope you will ask me to the wedding."

"It must be a very quiet one, with such an aged bride," said Hope, mournfully. "I shall be thirty-three; I could not wear white. Tom will be twenty-seven."

"I shall have to give Tom away, you see," said Mollie.

"It might be nice if *he* wore white, as he will still be young and blooming," suggested Hope. "You would look very striking in orange-blossoms, Tom dear."

"I'm afraid they would hardly stick on; what do you think, Mollie?" asked Tom who, lying on his back on the sofa, was supporting his sealskin-like head on his godfather's knee.

"Perhaps they will be out of fashion by then," was Mollie's best attempt at consolation, after stroking the glossy black poll.

"We think of Gravesend for a wedding excursion," went on Hope.

"Hanwell's a pretty place, have you ever thought of settling there?" innocently asked Mollie.

"Upon my word, Tom, I hardly think we could do better!" cried Hope, her self-command giving way at last, and breaking into a pretty wave of laughter, in which Mollie delightedly joined.

"Oh, Mr. Lyster," she said, her sweet eyes turned pleadingly up to him, "are you not ashamed of me for encouraging him to be so painfully foolish?"

"I do it myself, my dear, I do it myself," was his fond answer, as he pulled Thomas's ear.

One person in the room evidently did not take such a lenient view of Hope's conduct.

Major Westmortand had been standing in the window, square-shouldered and glum, gazing out at

the pouring rain. Even in his back the girl could read how he despised her and her levity. As she put her last question he turned round and looked at her, a glance of such biting contempt that it stung her like a blow. She could not endure it passively ; her patience was exhausted. Hitherto the attack had been all on his side : he had declared war, he had avoided her, he had slighted her by absolutely refusing even to go in to dinner with her, she had not resisted in any way. Now she was determined to protest, to show him that she was entirely defiant of him, and not in the least ashamed of herself. She looked up innocently in his face, in answer to his look.

"Yes?" she said. "I think you were going to say something?"

The unready Major was entirely disconcerted ; he hesitated, looked daggers, stammered out, "Nothing !" and hastily made his exit.

"What an addition he will be to our party at Leaming," she said sweetly, as the door closed upon him. "So chatty !"

An unkind peal of laughter from the others followed this remark. Evelyn heard the laugh, though not the speech which evoked it. They were laughing at him, he thought. That heartless, shameless flirt, who could not even spare a boy like Tom, but must drag him captive at her chariot-wheel—who could bewitch and befool an elderly widower like Lyster till he was unable to judge her impartially—she was making game of him, Evelyn. Well, it was something to be thankful for that Disney had escaped her—he would write, and put that view of the case before his friend. How could such a woman have such an exterior, such a modest, girlish, virginal air ; such a sweet face and such a voice—a voice that fell on the ear like splashes of bright water on a thirsty soil. She seemed, to the young man's angry fancy all up in arms for his friend, like a special concoction of the devil to ensnare young men. He felt as if he could

believe in the temptations of St. Anthony ; in the appearance of beautiful fiends.

For was it not true that, were the room never so full of people, if Hope spoke, howsoever gently, he heard every word? It seemed to him as if he could see her with his eyes shut. He had dreamed of her three nights following—he, whose sound and profound slumber was rarely visited by any dreams at all.

And now they were suggesting that he should go and mew himself up for a week with her in a shooting-box on the moors ! Not he ! He had told his father that he did not at all care to go, and, to his unfeigned astonishment, Mr. Westmorland had seemed very sympathetic on the subject. Certainly, the Hesselburgh air was working wonders for him. Evelyn had never known him so amiable, so pleasant, so little inclined for his favourite pastime of gibing at and taunting his only son. If it had not been for the presence of this Miss Merrion he would be feeling happier than he had done for some time. She spoilt everything, stirred up all his worst feelings, paralyzed his tongue, and the most grievous part of it all was that hateful fact that, though his mind and soul revolted, his senses yet felt the subtle charm which emanated from her. It was what he could not bear to think of, yet his severely truthful nature was constrained to own that he had already allowed this woman to occupy a hundred times more of his thoughts than any other member of her sex had ever done before.

He descended the staircase absently, still pondering the disastrous state of things.

“How there looked him in the face
An angel, beautiful and bright,
And how he knew it was a fiend,
That miserable knight !”

Just as he reached the hall, the carriage drove up, the pitiless rain pelting on the smoking horses and the white mackintoshes of the men. The two Fordes

alighted, and Evelyn, pleased to see his friend, went forward to greet him. Mrs. Saxon, who was, as usual, arranging details of the Sanitary League meeting with her friend, came out from the drawing-room leaving the door open ; so that Mr. Westmorland, from a seat at the fire, could see Evelyn standing over pretty Leo and smiling at some remark of hers.

She was looking charming. In great trepidation had she donned her little white gown and sash, ashamed of her own ignorance as to what was "the proper thing to wear." A long, red cloak covered her, and made her look like an old picture. Evelyn's father fancied her, to himself, standing in the great hall at Feverell, with the Westmorland emeralds about her throat, and robed in shimmering brocade. He longed for the time when he could take her in his arms, to kiss her and welcome his dear little daughter to her future rank and station. What an honour for the child ! but he must think she was worthy of it. Hope Merrion was, of course, the one he himself would have chosen ; but was it likely that such a girl would so much as look at a tongue-tied, heavy fellow like Evelyn ? Leo was a very good alternative ; he ought to be grateful it was no worse, and really she was looking at the Major as if she liked him !

Tom had seen the return of the carriage, and was in the hall in an instant.

"How first-rate of you to come through such weather !" he cried.

"As the carriage arrived, I concluded Mrs. Saxon expected us," said the doctor. "I had previously reduced my sister to the depths of despair by telling her that, as it was so wet, you would certainly not send for us."

"Of course we sent," replied the young gentleman ; "this awful weather one wants somebody to cheer one up. Will you come upstairs to my sister's sitting-room?"

Evelyn made his escape ; he was not going back to the room where Hope was—not yet !

The kitchen at Hesselburgh was a charming place. Its old-fashioned, open range precluded its ever being used for cooking except on the rarest occasions. New stoves had been fitted into the other kitchens, which were nearer the servants' hall. The stones of the floor were white as snow, the crimson matting formed a pretty contrast. The best dinner service, in all the rich depths of its old "Crown Derby" colouring, gleamed on the spotless dresser. The atmosphere was always warm and sleepy, and soothed by the loud ticking of the immemorial "grandfather's clock" in the corner. The huge, black, oak arm-chairs came from a farmhouse on the estate, and were more than three centuries old.

Here nurse and Mrs. Heather, the housekeeper, used to sit on Sunday evenings in peace ; and here oftentimes of an evening Tom brought his pipe, and Hope and Muriel sat on the fender and made toffee.

When the invading force to-day marched down the echoing passages and into their favourite haunt, they found the room already in occupation of the large tortoise-shell cat, Caligula by name, who was mounting guard over a quantity of bedding which surrounded the sumptuous fire.

"My stars!" cried Tom, who marched in first, pausing to stare at the goodly show of mattresses, pillows and blankets, "this is jolly considerate of cookie, providing us with divans gratis. Walk in, ladies and gentlemen! This is not, as you might think, the cooling-room of a Turkish bath."

"Sakes alive!" ejaculated Mrs. Heather, to the official next in rank to herself, pausing with the pastry-scissors in her hand, "if that ain't Master Tom took and marched all the visitors into my kitchen, with all the bedding airing for the gentlemen that's coming over from Tettle shooting!"

She trotted her stout self into the kitchen and paused with the broadest of grins on her good-humoured countenance, at sight of Tom, Muriel, Miss

Merrion, Mr. Lyster, and the two Fordes, all arrived in her territory.

"Master Tom, whatever are you doing with my cat?"

"He doesn't want all these pillows, cookie; I'm going to make the ladies comfortable."

"The ladies would be a deal more comfortable in the parlour, sir, I'm sure."

"Oh! you go along back where you came from, old lady. Where are all those grouse I brought in last week?"

"Hanging, of course, sir."

"You pick me out a pair of the nicest."

"The missis has give orders for all that isn't for table to-morrow to be sent down to the Deanery."

"You bet they don't go! I'm not going to shoot birds for the blooming Deanery!" cried Tom, much exercised with the weight of the mattresses, combined with this opposition to his will. "There, Miss Forde! you'll find that luxury itself! How fortunate all these things were handy! Three men are coming over from Tettle to shoot with my *pater* to-morrow, and that's why, I suppose! Now, I'll go and cook your tea myself, as cookie seems to have got a pain in her temper. Come along, Mrs. Heather, you just do as I tell you;" and he drove the submissive old woman out of the kitchen, shut the door, and could be heard distinctly, though distantly, asking if she thought Mrs. Abbot, at Leaming, ever made difficulties when he wanted anything.

"But we're off to Leaming next week, so perhaps we shall be a bit more comfortable," he concluded, pathetically.

Any mention of Leaming always disarmed cookie at once, as the artful Thomas knew full well, and he shortly reappeared with a beaming face, to announce that a *recherché* collation would soon be forthcoming.

"Tom, these pillows are too luxurious, I shall soon be asleep," said Muriel, in the soothing tones of absolute comfort.

The three gentlemen preferred the oak chairs, but the girls all looked very pretty, reclining among their cushions. Richard Forde thought Muriel appeared like the beauty in the Palace of Sleep, with her soft golden locks shading her calm brow. This kitchen tea-party was certainly a wonderfully good prescription for banishing formality and producing friendliness. It was hardly to be believed that they were all meeting for the first time, so sociable did they speedily become.

"Tom, let us be brilliant, and devise sports," cried Hope, who was in high spirits. "Here are six of us—young and able-bodied. Can we not invent something to astonish the elders to-night—a charade, or something?"

"A charade? Oh, do!" cried Leo.

After all, these "county" girls were very easy to get on with—quite simple and natural, and with apparently the same tastes as she herself.

"A good idea, Hope—you invent one," said Muriel, placidly.

"Isn't that Muriel to a T!" cried Tom, fraternally. "You invent, and she'll play. That's the division of labour. Hope and I get up at five to gather mushrooms, and Muriel eats them."

Muriel laughed in perfectly good-humoured acquiescence.

"Well, Hope and you are brilliant—I'm not," she replied. "That was a splendid charade you invented at Cousin Mary's last Easter. Won't you do that again?"

"Impossible!" cried Hope; "that only included us two, and we want something to set everybody busy to-night, with heaps of dressing-up."

"We have a property-box, absolutely full of stage costumes, which want airing most awfully," announced Tom.

"Let us have *tableaux vivants*," suggested Richard Forde. "I am a splendid hand at keeping still."

This idea found general favour; even Muriel was

delighted with it. Tom was despatched to bid one of the maids bring down the costume-box into Muriel's sitting-room, and to see that the background of curtains was duly erected in the large drawing-room. Hope took out a pencil, begged a half-sheet of paper from Mollie, and prepared to be business-like. Everyone made impossible suggestions, and even Muriel was in fits of laughter when Tom reappeared, his countenance visibly sobered down.

"I say," he said, lugubriously, "the *mater* thinks we ought to invite Westmorland to be in the show."

CHAPTER XIII.

TABLEAUX VIVANTS.

A stranger, and alone,
Among that brotherhood,
The monk Felix stood.

LONGFELLOW.

AFTER an instantaneous, but significant pause, Muriel said, calmly.

"Of course. But where is he?"

"In the library, or the billiard-room, I imagine. He can't be out of doors in this cataract. Shall I go and tell him we are here?"

"I wish you would, dear Tom," said his sister; and the good-humoured boy danced off, and, opening the library door, peeped cautiously in.

The Major was seated in a low American chair near the window, doing absolutely nothing but gazing out upon the persistent rain. His hands were deeply thrust into his pockets, and he was so still, that at first Tom thought that he was asleep; but the large steady grey eyes were wide open, with a look in them which was both weary and sad.

"I say, Westmorland, you're looking down in the mouth," said Tom, cheerily. "No wonder, if you sit here with nobody to interview but that confounded rain! I have been sent to hunt you out."

Evelyn looked up, and half closed the book upon his knee.

"You're very kind," he said, "but I am sorry you should trouble about me. I have been reading."

"Well, they're all having tea in the kitchen," persuasively went on the ambassador, "and now they are all seized with an idea to have impromptu *tableaux* to-night. We want your opinion—come on."

Evelyn looked distressed.

"I'm no good at it, Tom. I should feel like a fish out of water among you all."

"Oh, rubbish!" was the friendly answer, "you used to be fond of such things! What has come over you?"

As the frank, humorous young face bent over him, the Major felt a sudden impulse of friendliness towards the boy.

"I think I am growing old, Tom," he said, with a sigh. "We lead a lonely life at Feverell."

"Old! A fine joke! Shake it off and come along. You miss no end of the fun, always moping away by yourself, I tell you."

"I don't fancy I—I'm much wanted either," hesitated Evelyn.

Tom felt a little guilty, as he thought of that sudden hush in the kitchen which had greeted the speaker's name, but he gave a straightforward, manly answer.

"The fact is, that they think you look down on them. You put your back into it, show 'em what you can do, and they'll all think no end of you."

Evelyn laughed. Such persuasiveness could not fail to impress; besides, his lonely heart was longing to be cheered—he wanted to feel once more young amongst the young. He laid down his book, with a

paper-knife to mark the place—the page over which he had been reflecting.

“One likes to show the truth for the truth.
That the woman was light, is very true.
But suppose she says “Never mind that youth,
What wrong have I done to you?”

He repeated those words, those last words, over to himself as Tom and he passed through the swing-door, and threaded the tortuous stone passages in the servants' regions. What harm had she done to him? Was he justified in showing so sharp, so decided a resentment! Would it not, after all, be better to treat her with dignified politeness, declining only any advances towards intimacy? He was half afraid that he had been behaving rather foolishly.

Anything more comical, and, at the same moment, more inviting, than the aspect of the kitchen as they entered, would be difficult to imagine. A zealous and much amused kitchen-maid had just spread the table with tea, jam, piles of hot cakes, and the peculiar glory of Tom's *menu*—grouse, stewed with mushrooms in cream.

Mollie had been commanded to take the head of the table, and Richard was handing cups to the three girls, enthroned among the billowing mattresses.

“Hope!” were the words that greeted Evelyn's ear, in Leo Forde's bright tones. “Here are three of us—could we not have a girl's tableau—the three virtues?”

“Capital!” said Mollie approvingly.

“I am so tired of puns on my name!” objected Hope, petulantly.

“Your name is so very characteristic, duckie,” said Tom.

“So it is,” agreed Muriel, “you always see the bright side of things.”

“Miss Merrion must see the epitaph at Leaming, must she not, Tom?” asked Mollie.

“I was thinking of that,” said Muriel. “There is

a tablet in the wall of the church at Leaming, with an inscription which entirely turns upon a pun on your name, Hope."

"Yes, a last century man, of the romantic name of Pepper, who modestly describes himself as a "man of letters," lost his only daughter, who was called Hope," said Tom, narratively, "and he put up a very pretty verse to her memory, very pretty indeed, though the first line is either cribbed from a very well-known one, or else is a strange coincidence. Let's see—can you say it, Mollie?"

Mr. Lyster took off his spectacles, and recited as follows :

"Hope lives for ever in ye human herte,
When Hope dyes, therefore, thou hast done thy parte.
Go, rest, poor soule ! with lyfe thou canst not cope,
Nor bear its sorrows, havynge lost thy Hope !"

"There is real pathos in that," said Richard, feelingly.

"It is true, no one could live without Hope," said the owner of that name impetuously, and something bright flashed in her expressive eyes.

Tom, looking at her sympathetically, knew that she was thinking of Nellie, the girl who had resigned first hope, then existence, and now, after life's fitful fever, slept well in the very churchyard where this other Hope was laid.

"Every Sunday, as her heart was slowly breaking, she must have read that dreary tablet on the wall," thought the girl, with passionate sympathy and regret : the story had certainly made a deep impression on her.

Evelyn was very silent. The recitation of the old quatrain had recalled to his mind the piece of doggerel which had turned his father's brain. Two lines in it came forcibly before him, and, in the light of that fanciful play upon a name, gave him a curious sensation.

"Withouten Hope it shulde betyde,
The last sonne ys an only childe."

"What folly," he thought to himself in angry contempt, but he was thankful that none of the audience present knew of the prophecy.

It was impossible to tell to what foolish conclusions Tom's sharp wits would have led him.

He looked at Miss Merrion; it was almost the first time he had allowed his eyes to rest upon her since he discovered her identity. Her wide, sad eyes were fixed upon the pouring rain outside, her small smooth cheek, slightly flushed by contact with the great fire, rested on her hand. In spite of her late high spirits, she was feeling depressed, ashamed of the nonsense she had talked to Tom, with the sole object of disgusting the Major. A sense of injustice and cruelty on his part gave her a feeling of wrong. Why was he so hard and merciless to her, when he was so good and tender to his most irritating father? She looked at him, perhaps for an answer to this conundrum, and met the fixed gaze of his steady grey eyes.

It seemed to Evelyn Westmorland as if a strange thrill passed over his whole being. His heart leaped, as if it would rise to his throat, the blood coursed madly through his frame. For a moment everything grew dim to his sight, then astonishingly clear. For how long had he been gazing into those wide eyes, with their wet lashes? A second? an hour? And what could it mean, this sudden, new emotion which enfolded him? Was it pain or pleasure? What did he want to do? To take Hope Merrion to his heart, and kiss away the drops that trembled in act to fall?

With what seemed to him a bodily wrench he tore his look away from her face, and looked down at his plate, to steady himself; the hand which grasped it was shaking.

Well! it was over. The chat in the room was going on as before. Nobody had noticed his brief aberration. He could believe now in the story of the sirens. How strong it had been, momentarily, that

strange, horrible, delicious impulse ! It filled him with shame and repugnance.

"I seem marked for misfortune," was his morbid reflection. "All my life, I have never known what men meant by falling in love ; why am I visited now by this horrible infatuation ? Fortunately, I am old enough and strong enough to hate it and to crush it."

He looked, at the moment, as if he were ready to hate and to crush the unconscious cause of so much disorder. Hope winced as she encountered his morose look. She rather inclined to the idea that his solitary life with his eccentric father had made him unlike other people ; she could not otherwise explain his extraordinary attitude of personal enmity. That he should dislike the woman whom he believed to have treated his friend badly, seemed natural enough, but this fierce hostility was unaccountable. She had never before encountered hatred, and it pained her unspeakably ; moreover, she thought the whole party must soon see it, it was so offensively obvious.

"Hope," said she to herself, "some measures must be taken to stop this. You must pick up the dignity which, when with Tom and Muriel, you habitually lay aside, and show this man his place."

"Hope is Hope, Muriel Faith, and Miss Forde Charity," announced Tom, with unction. "Westmorland, will you be a wounded knight, for Miss Forde to exercise her charitable functions upon?"

"Certainly," said Evelyn, promptly, for he liked Leo.

"What am I to do with him ? Give him a dose of medicine ?" asked the young lady, quaintly.

"No, no ! How unpoetical you are !" cried Tom. "He is dying for his country, or something of that kind, and you support his fainting head."

"I hope he will not forget what it is he dies for, like Gambetta," laughed Richard.

"I don't have to say anything, do I ?" cried Evelyn, in sudden panic.

"No, no, no—oh, dear, no ! You merely have to

look half dead and interesting," said Tom, reassuringly.

"I feel certain I ought to be holding a cup to his lips," said Leo.

"I think it would look well," opined Mollie.

"I shall whisper to you 'a tablespoonful in water, three times a day,'" said Leo, solemnly.

"If you do, I'll punish you, you young monkey," said Richard, with severity.

"It would be still more realistic if you were to hold his nose, Miss Forde," put in the incorrigible Tom.

"Don't make game, Tom, this is a serious tableau," said Muriel, "and it will be very pretty. I shall hold a lamp, as well as the ebony cross, and Hope will have the great anchor which we made for Britannia."

"Couldn't I be kneeling at her feet, as her knight, with my motto painted whacking big on my shield, *Dum spiro spero?*" pleaded Tom.

"No nonsense, Tom. That tableau is settled most satisfactorily. Now, the next is the Casket Scene from the 'Merchant of Venice.' Hope is Portia, Miss Forde Nerissa, Major Westmorland Bassanio, Tom Gratiano. That ought to be a good one, the dresses are lovely."

"And next," cried Hope, interrupting, "Tennyson's 'Day Dream,' in three scenes, Mr. Forde as the Prince, Muriel the enchanted Princess. In the first scene, the Prince, with drawn sword, lifts the curtain and looks in; in the second, he bends over the couch; in the third, everybody is wide-awake."

"Capital!" said Mollie, "and, with the three others already settled, that makes enough, I think. Now to rehearsal."

"We will retire upstairs for that, as you have all done tea, and there we can inspect the costumes," suggested Muriel; and they evacuated the kitchen, pausing on the way to propose and carry a vote of thanks to cookie for her hospitality.

Evelyn was surprised to find that the grouping and arranging for these *tableaux* was anything but irksome

to him. Perhaps a word or two of approbation was felt to be more stimulating than he was willing to allow. A murmur from one of the girls of "Major Westmorland really does it very well," an approving nod from Mr. Lyster, had their effect, though he might not care to own that it was so.

His appearance in armour—one of the suits from the hall—was certainly captivating. Mrs. Saxon looked in on the busy company for a minute to announce that she had sent the carriage for the curate and his wife, and Mr. and Mrs. Copeland to swell their audience; and she paused, really surprised at the fine look of his square, stern head and dark, closely-curling hair, set off by the gleaming corselet. His casque he held in his hand, and the mistress of the house stood so long regarding him that, at last, it struck even him as amusing. He laughed his rare, pleasant laugh, and made her a sweeping bow.

"Has your ladyship any commands to lay upon me?" he asked.

"Such as to fetch the 'mighty Boke' from the hand of the dead wizard, Michael Scott? No, but you look quite fitted for such an errand," said the lady, with real admiration, "though hardly such an unlettered champion as Deloraine; more like Hope's favourite, Count Gismond, perhaps."

"Not in the least like Count Gismond!" cried Hope, in a hurry; and then checked herself, and added, confusedly, "at least, I always think Gismond was fair."

"Scarcely, if you consider his nationality," said Mrs. Saxon; "but I must be off and settle the preliminaries of this impromptu dinner-party."

"We Saxons love to do things on the spur of the moment," remarked Tom, in tones of satisfaction, as the door closed upon her. "You will see what a success this show will be just because it is spontaneous—evolved out of our respective consciousness; only one wants to be awfully clever to do it well. Fortunately, we are that."

"We are, we are!" laughed Hope.

It seemed to Evelyn as if that whole evening passed away like a dream, until suddenly he awakened to find himself alone in Mrs. Saxon's morning-room, which was doing duty as a green-room.

He walked in clad in his armour, fully attired for his part in the "Three Virtues" *tableau*. Nobody was there; another picture, in which he had no part, was being shown. He had already appeared, as a very handsome Bassanio in the "Casket Scene," and his father had only wished that Leo, and not Hope, had been the Portia; though he was constrained to admit that the parts had been rightly allotted, and that to reverse them would be to spoil the *tableau*.

Hope's expression of dignity struggling with longing, suspense, and fear, was inimitable. Bassanio looked as if he fully realised the gravity of the situation.

"I am a born actress, am I not?" Hope had said afterwards to Muriel, as she removed the heavy brocade from her slim person. "I so lost myself in the part that I quite forgot how I dislike that man!"

"Do you dislike him?" asked Muriel, with a faint accent of surprise.

Hope made a gesture of repugnance, and gave a little shudder.

"He is like a bad conscience, always reminding me of my one great mistake."

"What do you mean?"

"I have not told you before—somehow it made me feel sick to talk of it; but he is a friend of Edgar Disney, and has heard his version of that hateful affair! Ugh! I wish I had not mentioned it, it puts a bad taste in my mouth. I sometimes think, Muriel, that I wish I had never been born."

"It is no good to wish that," was the calm answer, "because you are born; you don't want to die, do you?"

"No!" cried Hope sharply, drawing her two hands suddenly to her heart as if to shut in the life,

"no, no! I do not want to die. I love life—especially in summer time, I love it! I want to keep it, and enjoy it. I will not let him spoil it; I will be happy in spite of him!"

Muriel stood very still, her golden hair in a shower about her, looking earnestly at her friend.

"I wonder how it is," she observed at length, "that you always manage to crowd so many emotions into your life? Nothing ever happens to me."

"I am always in a scrape, somehow," said Hope; and she laughed, but the laugh was a tearful one.

Tom banged on the door.

"Come on, Muriel! You're wanted on at once."

The golden-haired apparition vanished, and Hope, left to herself, resolutely dashed away the inconvenient drops, and arrayed herself for her emblematical appearance in simple white draperies, with a diamond star in the soft hair above her forehead.

She knew that she looked very pretty, as she stood before the long glass; but she did not linger there, for personal vanity was a failing she was almost wholly without. Gathering up her trailing white robes, she crept softly into the green-room to find her anchor; and there stood Evelyn, in full harness, his arms folded over the hilt of his huge sword.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MAJOR TO THE RESCUE.

One should master one's passions—love in chief
And be loyal to one's friends.

R. BROWNING.

EACH faced the other silently a moment, and then Hope turned aside and fetched her great gilt anchor from the corner where it leaned against the wall.

Without a word to her companion, she sat down and began to arrange a wreath of flowers round its stem. After a complete silence, he spoke with great suddenness.

"What made you say that I was not like Count Gismond?"

She replied without looking up, or showing any signs of surprise.

"Count Gismond would not believe slander against a woman," said she, gently.

"Have I done so?" he asked, hesitatingly. "Have I been too hasty—believed something about you that was not true?"

"I am really quite unable to inform you," said Hope, sarcastically. "I fancy you know very little of me, and you have thought proper to be extremely rude; but as to your beliefs or misbeliefs about me, I am quite ignorant, and I must confess that they trouble me very little."

He was not at once ready with a rejoinder. When at last he spoke, it was with some agitation.

"I hate injustice," he said, in the tone of one excusing himself, "and I think I resent injuries to my friends more keenly than injuries to myself. I have been led to believe that you are the Miss Merrion who has broken my friend's heart; if I have been too hasty—if there is any mistake, I shall feel like despairing of forgiveness."

He waited, but she gave no answer.

"Has there been a mistake?" he asked, severely.

"I think there has, but it is a slight one," she said at last, and coolly. "I am not at all inclined to believe that I have broken any one's heart; but it is true that I was engaged to Captain Disney, and that I broke the engagement. I believe these are the facts which, in your judgment deprive me of the right to the ordinary conventional civilities of society."

"I am afraid," he said in a low voice, "that I have expressed my feelings with unwarrantable plainness. I—I think, though, you would find it easier to forgive

me if you could see his letters, and easier to believe in your having made him suffer terribly."

"Captain Disney was always a good letter-writer," said Hope, icily. "I have seen specimens of his skill in that way."

"You can never have known him, if you speak of him in that tone."

"I wish I never had," she replied, emphatically.

"We shall always disagree on this point," he said, angrily. "Always. It is a waste of time to discuss it."

He looked at her in a tumult of feeling, as she sat deftly twining the flowers about her anchor, with graceful movements of her white bare arms. Utterly heartless! he thought. And yet he yearned to know the whole—to know why Miss Merrion had dismissed her lover.

"I wish I knew the whole facts of the case!" he burst out, almost without intending it.

"That you never will," said Hope, decidedly, "for I have not the slightest wish or intention to justify myself to you; and you will certainly not get the truth from Captain Disney."

"This of my friend! Thank you, Miss Merrion," he said, in deep resentment.

"I am sure the subject must be very painful to you, but, in fairness, remember that you introduced the discussion," was her quiet answer.

He turned away, baffled: and, as he turned, she raised her eyes and looked at him, a curious look, impossible to describe.

The door was now opened to admit Leo and Muriel, both dressed for their parts, and both looking exceedingly pretty.

Evelyn thought, however, that something was wanting in both of them—that rare, subtle charm which he felt that Hope possessed. He was convinced, at last, that this charm was a snare; he did not believe that it was possessed by any woman truly simple-minded and modest; he was half inclined to

hold that it was horror which stirred him as his eyes so perversely rested upon her. He noticed her pretty arm, curved so delicately about her flower-wreathed emblem, and the little flexible fingers which coaxed the blossoms into place with tender touches. Cruel hands ! They had not scrupled to toss Disney's heart away in the dust, as the little feet danced along their happy road of popularity, youth, and sunshine !

"How pretty you have made your anchor !" cried Leo, with warm admiration.

"I am thinking I have misinterpreted my character," she answered, with a small, unsteady laugh. "I wish that I had adopted the imagery of the painter, Watts, and blinded my eyes, and sat me down in sadness with my harp, and all the strings broken except one. It is far nearer our earthly idea of Hope !"

"Nonsense, duckie," said Tom, who had come in as she made this cheerful speech, "don't talk like that, but make haste. Come along, William of Deloraine !"

It was a pretty picture. Hope was the glory of it. Every one's eyes rested longest on the inspired little face, and the limbs so lightly poised that it seemed as if she must float upwards. Muriel looked like a saint enshrined, the light of her lamp flickering over her peaceful face : and Leo was most tenderly sympathetic as she bent over the wounded hero.

It was a thousand pities that any untoward adventure should mar the artistic pleasure which this *tableau* created. Muriel's lamp was formed by a piece of lighted candle which had accidentally become loose, having been insecurely fixed ; moreover, it is difficult, as every one knows, to hold anything straight for long, without looking at it, and, after a very short time, the strain of lifting her arm so high made her hand shake. It took but a puff of wind from a suddenly opened door to blow over the toppling candle, and it fell on Charity's flimsy white robe.

Muriel, her eyes being fixed in another direction, did not know that it was the lighted candle which dropped. Leo, stooping over her knight, did not

regard it ; it was not until a bright forked flame shot up in the eyes of the recumbent knight himself, that he leaped to his feet, to see the young girl in a blaze.

Leo, for the moment, was panic-struck, and would have run, but Evelyn caught her in a grip like iron, and, horribly impeded by his armour, forced her down upon the floor. The flame touching her flesh at the moment made her shriek, there was a rush forward of the audience, and Richard was on the platform in a moment, but Hope was quickest. In an instant she had seized one of the heavy curtains which were hung on screens to form a background to the stage, and before even Tom, who had darted for the hearth-rug in the green-room could return, had flung it to the Major, who, holding it down on the struggling girl, crushed out the fire in a moment.

"It is all right," he said at once, in his natural voice, and quite composedly. "Tom, tell them there is no harm done. Miss Forde, are you unhurt? I am afraid I was rather rough with you, but there was not a moment to be lost."

"She has fainted," said her brother, hurriedly, as he bent over her with ashy face and trembling voice. "God bless you, Westmorland, she must have been hurt before I could get to her."

"Is she not burned at all?" asked the Major, in a tone of keen anxiety.

"I can scarcely tell ; her dress is scorched—no ! I certainly don't see anything," said Dick, feverishly. "Poor little woman ! Leo darling !"

"Lift her up," said Evelyn, in the short, military tones of one commanding. "Carry her upstairs, lay her on her bed. Don't let her come to herself in this crowd."

Dick obediently followed instructions, and carried the pale form of sweet Charity through the sympathetic audience into the hall, where he paused irresolute, until Muriel's gentle tones were heard.

"This way, to my room—oh ! it was all my fault !" she cried.

"There is no harm done, indeed, Miss Saxon," said Richard, gasping a little over his burden, "she is only frightened, not hurt, thanks to Westmorland; he's a queer sort, but a real help in an emergency."

So they proceeded to Muriel's room, where, with the help of nurse, they devoted themselves to Leo.

"And now, I suppose, I can go and get rid of this ridiculous get-up," said Evelyn, crossly, walking into the green-room.

His eyes looked round restlessly, apparently in search of some one who was not there.

"Well done, indeed, Sir Knight," cried cordial little Mollie, beaming through his spectacles with effusion.

"It is Miss Merrion really whom we should thank," was the bluff reply. "I had nothing handy, and this detestable armour was so much in my way. She has a great deal of presence of mind."

"She has, indeed, everything one could wish. I have never known any one so charming," was the warm answer. Evelyn was silent at this, and marched out of the room, coming, in the hall, suddenly into contact with his father. He started back, puzzled at the strangely softened look in the face which, to him, usually expressed so much acerbity.

"My dear Evelyn, my dear son," faltered Mr. Westmorland, taking the big hand in both of his. "Evelyn, my boy, I am proud of you—yes, proud!"

Evelyn, stood petrified; he was far too shy to receive so totally unexpected a tribute gracefully, but his whole heart softened and swelled out on the instant to answer this precious touch of love. He felt an uncomfortable expanding in his throat, and the colour came to his dark face, as he said, harshly.

"You are mistaken, I did nothing. It was the obvious thing. I was nearest to her."

"You did well," was the answer, with the voice and manner of an emperor commending his vassal, "exceedingly well, and the circumstance will no doubt tell in your favour with the young lady."

"I don't so much care about that," said his son,

between his teeth, "so long as it tells in my favour with you."

Whereat the old man looked him in the eyes, narrowly, and yet kindly, and replied, with an affectionate smile.

"My son, if you sincerely wish for my favour, you know full well the immediate way to obtain it," and so passed on, down the passage, leaving the soldier with his heart beating great, heavy strokes against his side, because his father had spoken a kind word to him.

He repaired to his room, and rang up the valet to help him out of his armour, a rare proceeding with him; and when the man arrived,

"You must get the scissors, and cut me out of this sleeve, please," he said, "or you may be bringing off the skin as well; I am scorched, I fancy."

He had a considerable burn, four or five inches long, and very raw, and it was painful enough to make him set his teeth firmly while Farren was dressing it; but for all that it was little heed he took of the pain, for dwelling on the words that had so warmed his heart.

"It's fearfully hard to go against him when he is kind," he thought. "God bless him! what a wonderful man he is."

And, after the servant had left him, he sat down for a little while alone, to steady himself, and so fell to reflecting and musing as to whether or no it were quite impossible for him to carry out that beloved father's will. It surely would not be hard to be gentle and kind all the days of his life to a bright creature like Leo Forde. And what a companion she would be for his father! For, in these for the first-time-indulged matrimonial schemes, the idea of separating from him never once occurred to Evelyn. She would light up the old house, and amuse them both. And she, at least, was innocent and ingenuous. Surely he could keep her so. If only she did not find him, Evelyn, too terribly dull. That was his

weak point. He felt himself so incapable of holding such a young, whimsical thing, full of life and joy ; he seemed to himself, owing to his father's long training, quite destitute of the power to attract strongly. He had always fought so shy of women that now he was out of touch with them. All freedom of intercourse had been checked by Mr. Westmorland's nonsense about the prophecy, and the experience of his garrison friends had not been encouraging.

And yet—yet—was it not his duty to risk it now ? Certainly he was not in love with Leo, but at all events she had no rival . . . no, no rival. He could devote his life to doing his duty to her—making her as happy as he knew how. He did not believe in “falling in love.” It was an illusion—a fantasy.

He caught his breath sharply, and closed his eyes. The vision of Hope rose before him—Hope in her white robes, with milky arms twining flowers about the golden anchor ; he smelt vividly the perfume of violets which always seemed to go with her. It revolted him. To marry Leo, to have a wife and interests of his own—would not that be the best way to cure the inexplicable madness which had seized him ? He felt as if he must build up defences, make walls, dig trenches, to separate himself from the hateful influence—from the power she seemed to exhale, as flowers do sweetness.

“I believe I ought to try,” he said, half aloud. “He will be so pleased—and he is all I have to care about.”

CHAPTER XV.

A DESIGNING GIRL.

Neither man's aristocracy, this, nor God's—God knoweth !

ARTHUR HUGH CLOUGH.

It is curious to notice how, in this our wide-awake and carefully-guarded century, wherein nobody is surprised and nothing ever happens for which everyone was not fully prepared,—what a sensation any kind of adventure, no matter how trifling, makes in the British household.

In the days when watchmen were set upon the walls continually, the everlasting presence of danger braced the nerves, it is to be supposed ; but at Hesselburgh, the least jar in the admirably oiled household machinery was an extraordinary exception.

The incident of the fire and of the Major's prompt action spread like magic. The servants eyed him with admiring glances when he appeared again, and told all their particular friends in the village. Mr. Clarke, the curate, and Mr. and Mrs. Copeland made a point of driving next morning into Norchester to let folks have the benefit of a ripple of news in the stagnant pool of dulness which was their chronic condition. Mr. Clarke had an errand at the Residence. With all the pride of an eye-witness, he related to Canon Shorthouse the thrilling and romantic incident. Mrs. Shorthouse called that very afternoon on Mrs. Hancock to let her share in the piquancy of the sensation.

Mrs. Hancock and her son were seated among all the glories of clean chintzes and stiff white Nottingham lace curtains in their drawing-room, entertaining

the Miss Presses with tea. The music-stool wore a crochet antimacassar with an air of conscious pride, and not only the gilt chimney mirror, but also the green and white lustres were duly provided with pink-paper filagree coverings. Mrs. Hancock prided herself upon being a good housekeeper. The tea was beyond reproach, certainly, and the old silver melon teapot as bright as care could make it. Mr. Sayers Hancock handed round hot cakes to the two thin spinster ladies with genial, though nervous good will.

Mrs. Hancock wore, super-added (as Laurence Sterne would say) to the festive purple gown, a large collar of Limerick lace, in the centre of which a lively miniature of the late Mr. Hancock reposed, with a roguish smile; though, if local report was to be trusted, which it probably was not, his connubial repose whilst he was still in the flesh, had not been as ideal as it might be.

Into these surroundings the canon's wife was cordially received; and surely no atmosphere could have been more congenial for such a charming little piece of news. She was not in a hurry; she never spoilt the effect of an announcement by an ill-considered haste. Like Louis Moore, she preferred to taste the nectar of existence cool as dew. It was not until she had drunk a cup of tea, eaten two pieces of well buttered tea-cake, and been informed that the Misses Gall (five in number) had gone abroad, and that the married brother of the Misses Openshaw was, after all, not to be expected from America this summer, that she remarked, casually.

"I suppose you have heard that the Fordes were at Hesselburgh last night?"

The red and vindictive eye of Mrs. Hancock fixed itself balefully on the speaker.

"Oh, indeed! A party?" said she.

"A party it must have been, by all I can hear, though Mr. Clarke, who was present, says it was an impromptu one."

"Present, was he?" said the elder Miss Press, in

breathless interest. "And did he tell you all about it?"

"It was a theatrical party," announced Mrs. Shorthouse, bringing out the dire news with a look of perfect unconcern, as if she were ignorant of the flutter of disapproval which would infallibly follow her statement.

"I am not in the least surprised," said Mrs. Hancock, superbly.

"I really don't know what the dean and Mrs. Goslett will say!" cried Miss Harriet Press.

"It's much good their saying will do them!" returned the hostess, grimly. "I hear there are to be theatricals at the palace next Christmas."

"We live to see changes," said Miss Press, piously, as if resolved that it was her duty to take theatricals as patiently as any other trial.

"Were they good? The theatricals," questioned the stout and bearded Mr. Sayers Hancock, with some trepidation.

His business was in Wokeford, which, as every one knows, is a manufacturing town and much more go-ahead than Norchester, and he was apt to think that his austere mother drew her line in too narrow a circle.

He had seen nothing to censure, either in the countenance or manners of Miss Forde.

"Mr. Clarke tells me they were most sumptuously got up; Miss Merrion appeared covered with diamonds," replied Mrs. Shorthouse, on whose utterances the whole party hung rapt.

"Dear me! that was the pretty girl who behaved so—ahem!—so *peculiarly* at Duffield the other day," said Miss Press; "walking about the gardens with half a dozen young gentlemen at her heels."

"Just so! But the interesting part of my story is yet to come," said the narrator, unable to resist a smile of intense satisfaction at this point. "Quite a romance in real life! Though, indeed, it is a mercy the consequences were not more serious."

"Bless me! What happened?" gasped Miss Har-

riety, while the eyes of all the rest of the audience asked the same question.

"May I trouble you with my cup, Mr. Hancock?" went on the oracle, serenely. "Yes, thank you! Another cup, Mrs. Hancock—cream and sugar. Oh, thanks! I always say your tea is more to be praised than any in Norchester. Another cake! Must I? I shall eat no dinner to-night! But in these days five o'clock tea is such an institution."

Her listeners were on the rack, the tea-maker almost insensible even to compliment, so eager was she for what was coming.

"You were saying——" she murmured.

"I was saying," said Mrs. Shorthouse, replacing her half-emptied cup in the saucer. "Oh, yes, about Miss Forde's terrible accident."

"Accident!"

"Leonora Forde!" they cried, almost simultaneously.

"Yes, indeed! It is only through the presence of mind of Major Westmorland that she escaped being burnt to death."

"You don't say so!"

Here indeed was a sensation! Here was something to flavour the Norchester tea-parties all through the dreary winter months that were coming! An adventure! An accident! A rescue! Victim—a pretty girl, hero—an eligible young man! Nothing was lacking to heighten the interest or arouse the imagination.

The very air vibrated with excitement, the unamiable Maltese terrier with a pink ribbon about its neck, leaped from its cushions and yapped shrilly.

"It appears," said the canon's wife, when order had been restored, "that they were performing some scene in which Leo Forde, all in white, had to support Major Westmorland's head, he being dressed in armour."

"Good gracious!" said Mrs. Hancock.

"Miss Saxon stood behind with a lighted torch, a

spark fell on Miss Forde's dress, instantly she was a mass of flames. In a moment the Major had leaped to his feet, seized her in his arms, and, while all the spectators were dumb with horror, stamped out the fire with the utmost heroism. He was then seen to hang over her lifeless body in agony, repeatedly crying to her brother to know if she were hurt. Finally he carried her upstairs in his arms."

"What, the Major?" said Mr. Hancock.

"Yes, indeed! The canon had the whole story from Mr. Clarke who is not likely to make inaccurate statements! Major Westmorland bore the unconscious girl upstairs, and then, overcome with emotion, retired to his own room and locked himself in. When at last he did come down, he was as white as ashes. Young Saxon went up to him and seized him by the wrist, when he gave a stifled cry, and turned quite livid. They looked at his sleeve, and made him take off his coat, *and the whole of his arm was one raw wound from the shoulder to the wrist.*"

"Oh, Mrs. Shorthouse! I shall faint!" cried Miss Harriet Press, hysterically.

"It seems that he could not put on the sleeve-pieces of the armour, through not knowing how to rivet them, which accounts for it, I suppose. News was brought down that Miss Forde's injuries were next to nothing, but, however, she was not allowed to go home that night. Her brother went home by himself, and he was to go up there this morning to hear how she is."

"I think the least we can do will be to call at Minstergate on our way home, to inquire for Miss Forde, Harriet," said Miss Press. "Her brother would have felt her death excessively."

"I always thought Leonora Forde a designing girl," remarked Mrs. Hancock, suddenly, "and now I am quite sure of it," and so had the narrative unhinged her that she opened her tea-pot and absently stirred up the tea-leaves with a spoon, a proceeding watched with horror by the ladies round.

"You don't surely think she set fire to herself on purpose?" panted Miss Harriet.

"How do I know? It would be all of a piece," was the snappish reply. "It won't be her fault if she isn't married. Men," with a stony eye on her meek and rosy son, "men are taken in with that sort of person; I'm not. It's my belief that she all along meant to catch this Major Westmorland, and that is what makes her so free and independent with her betters:" an angry flush on the matron's cheek might have led a reader of character to guess that she had intended for Leo, if she had behaved herself, no less an honor than that of being her daughter-in-law. "Well! It will be a fine stroke of business for the doctor if his sister makes such a brilliant match; I only wish her husband joy of her, that's all!"

"But the poor young doctor will miss her," timidly suggested Miss Harriet.

"Pooh!" cried Mrs. Hancock, quite rudely.

"I wonder," said Mrs. Shorthouse, suddenly struck with an idea, "if the Fordes will be at the dinner-party on Wednesday."

"Mark my words, they will!" said Mrs. Hancock, with fearful energy. "Sayers! Don't sit there blinking! Take Miss Press's empty cup!"

Her son, who had been pensively staring out into the garden through his gold-rimmed spectacles, started violently and went, in a knock-kneed and submissive manner, to do her bidding.

"Did not I tell you, the first day that young man arrived in Norchester, that I saw him alighting at the doctor's door?" went on the lady. "I thought that very day of what was going on, and you see I was right."

"I—I have not heard that they are engaged yet, not positively engaged," faintly put in Mrs. Shorthouse. "Mr. Clarke did not say that."

"Perhaps you will hear it announced on Wednesday," suggested Miss Harriet.

"It is as plain as the nose on my face," said Mrs.

Hancock, with conviction. "The Saxons take no notice of the Fordes until the arrival of this young man : then at once they single them out. Mrs. Shorthouse and I, ourselves, saw young Westmorland introduce Leonora Forde to Tom Saxon, and anybody at Duffield might see that he played tennis with nobody but her. Well ! some people are born with a silver spoon in their mouth."

"Very true," said Mr. Sayers Hancock, mournfully.

There was food for a great deal more talk before the party separated. Such a complete anecdote rarely fell in their way, poor souls, and they made the most of it. Tom Saxon always said it was the family vocation to provide material for discussion in the neighbourhood, but even he little guessed how literally true this was. All other interests paled before this new one. Even the vagaries at the palace were forgotten. The rumours that the bishop's eldest daughter was to marry an actor, and that his eldest son was to become president of an agnostic association, were never so much as mentioned.

They sat on and talked, warmed through and through with the gratifying consciousness that they and their friends were the only really respectable people in Norchester.

"Well !" was Mrs. Hancock's parting word when at last her visitors took leave ; "if I had a daughter, she would have been very unlike Leonora Forde !"

There was no questioning the entire probability of such a statement, it bore the stamp of truth.

But when left alone with her son and heir, when she had re-arranged the tumbled antimacassars, and pushed the rug straight with her foot, her first remark sounded to the startled young man strangely irrelevant.

"It has always been a marvel to me, Sayers, how it is that, living as you do in a gay place like Wokeford, you have never learned to play lawn tennis !"

Mrs. Shorthouse, it being too late for the afternoon service at the cathedral, went her way up Minster-gate towards the Berlin wool-shop, with intent to have a chat with the excellent Miss Gibson who kept it, and to regale her with the prevailing sensation. To her disappointment, Miss Gibson was quite *au fait* in the whole affair, for Mrs. Saxon had sent down the groom on the pony that morning, for cotton for dressing burns. Indeed, she was able to supplement Mr. Clarke's version with one or two piquant particulars, such as that the Major owned to having had a bad night, and would be prevented from shooting that day, but that Miss Forde was quite well, and all the young ladies and gentlemen in merry spirits.

"The young are always thoughtless, mum," said Miss Gibson, "and she so near her death too, pretty dear!"

Returning from this visit, Mrs. Shorthouse was favoured with a real stroke of luck, for at the door of Dr. Forde's stood the Hesselburgh brougham, and Richard just helping his sister to alight.

There stood Leo, radiant and bright-eyed, nodding and smiling to the coachman in farewell.

"My dear," said the canon's wife, hurrying up, "I am very glad to see you so well after your terrible accident."

"Oh, have you heard about it? How funny!" cried Leo, with a surprised laugh.

"But it scarcely comes under your heading of a 'terrible accident,' Mrs. Shorthouse, I think," said Dick, good-humouredly. "Leo's dress caught fire, and was at once put out by the person nearest at the time, that's all!"

"My dear Dr. Forde, I am shocked to hear you underrate the mercies of Providence in this way. What would have happened had Major Westmorland not been near, or had he not been equal to the occasion? She would have burned to death!"

"My dear Mrs. Shorthouse, no girl could burn to death in a room full of sane men who all had free

access to her. No doubt, Westmorland's promptness minimised the consequences, but I really think you exaggerate the danger."

"Oh, well," said the lady, determined to be amiable "you doctors always make so light of a thing! But your sister no doubt feels what an escape she has had."

"Almost a complete escape," replied Leo, with animation. "Just a few blisters and one tiny raw place on my shoulder! Even less than Major Westmorland, who has really hurt his wrist. Oh, and a good piece of my hair was burnt off, but Dick says it saved my neck. It was all hanging down, you know!"

"She can afford to lose a bit! She is well supplied," said Dick, fondly.

"And I suppose you are sorry to leave Hesselburgh?" said Mrs. Shorthouse, benignly.

The future Mrs. Westmorland was worth conciliating. She had heard her husband say there were fine livings in the Westmorland gift.

"Oh, very! But I shall see them again to-morrow," said Leo, brightly.

"Oh, indeed!" replied her questioner, thinking of the marvellous astuteness of Mrs. Hancock. "And what did all you young folks do when you got together?"

Leo's foot was on the threshold. Dick was hurrying her in. A mischievous smile dimpled her pretty mouth. She knew quite well that every word she let fall would go to Mrs. Hancock.

"What did we do?" cried she, "why, the very nicest thing I ever did in my life! The Saxons often do it! *We all went and had tea in the kitchen!* Good-bye, Mrs. Shorthouse!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MERRION FAMILY.

Where children are not, heaven is not, and heaven if they come
not again shall be never :

But the face and the voice of a child are assurance of heaven and
its promise for ever !

A. C. SWINBURNE.

WITH a plantiveness born only of summer night and
summer sea, the band at the end of the pier was sob-
bing out the dying notes of a waltz. The sound
floated in, lazily, like the scarcely-stirred air, through
the windows of one of the large houses on the espla-
nade.

The occupants of the house had just done dining ;
they were at dessert.

The host leaned back in his chair and tasted his
wine ; his wife rested her round white arms on the table-
cloth, and tried, not very successfully, to peel some
early walnuts ; their guest sat in a reverie, absently
fingering the stem of his wine-glass.

Outside, there sounded distinctly the patter of
hurrying feet on the asphalte parade ; laughter and
voices also were tossed in at the window in snatches ;
the low murmur of the sea was soothingly audible.
A silence had fallen on the trio.

The band stopped.

Frederic Merrion, the host, looked up.

"Will you come out on the pier, Bertha?" he said.

"I am not sure ; I feel lazy, it is too hot," she
replied ; "you and Mr. Greville had better take your
cigars. I'll try the sofa and a novel. Is that a good
prescription, Mr. Greville?"

"My dear Mrs. Merrion, that entirely depends on

whose novel," said her visitor, removing his double eyeglass.

"Oh, I'm not cultured," said she calmly, leaning back in her chair so as fully to show the beautiful curves of her figure. "I like an entertaining story, I hate all that uncomfortable stuff that Hope reads. You and she would agree admirably.

Gilbert Greville did not reply at once. His hesitation was owing to a strange mixture of feeling. To the name just mentioned he had been laboriously trying to steer the talk all dinner-time. He had met Mr. and Mrs. Merrion just outside his hotel that afternoon, and had accepted their invitation to dinner solely in hopes of hearing that name. He had been forced to wait until dessert to hear it introduced; now he wanted to prevent the conversation from glancing off, and yet not to show his own anxiety.

"Are you accusing me of a partiality for uncomfortable stuff, Mrs. Merrion!" he said after a minute.

"You know what I mean—George Meredith, and so on," she said, vaguely.

"Miss Merrion reads George Meredith?"—interrogatively.

"I have heard you talk to her about it," she replied, decisively.

"Last year," he said, and was silent.

His mind was back in last year—last summer, when he had joined Hope and her brother and his wife in Switzerland. He was remembering the way that life had seemed to enlarge for him after Hope's appearance in it. He had made a great many resolutions since then. He would write a book, enter Parliament, raise the masses, do something to make his name honored and respected. None of these resolutions had been kept. He began to think they never would be, unless Hope herself came personally to assist.

"We are starting for Switzerland next week, as I think I told you," said Bertha, breaking into his

meditations. "We send the children, nurses and governesses, to Dalby Sands."

"Does Miss Merrion join you?" asked Greville, hoping that his tone was natural.

"I wish she would," said Hope's brother; "but when once she is in Norshire, with those crazy friends of hers, there is no catching her again. They all seem to go mad together."

"Is she there now?"

The guest was examining his spoon so narrowly as to make Mrs. Merrion glad she had brought her own plate down with her.

"Yes, she is in some unheard-of spot in the middle of the moors, staying at a shooting-box with a detachment of the Saxon house-party. I have written to her to come with us, but I have not the least idea that my entreaties will be effectual."

"Hope is more eccentric than ever," said Bertha, absently, "since the breaking of her engagement to Edgar Disney."

Greville's heart gave a thump, and a slight shock passed through him. He had never heard of Miss Merrion's brief engagement. Surprise and relief were almost simultaneous, but he thought it wisest not to expose all his ignorance.

"Oh, is that broken off?" he said, composedly.

"Yes. Her doing. A pity, I thought, as my brother, Captain Merrion, considers him a thoroughly nice fellow," said Frederick.

Bertha laughed lazily.

"I suppose Hope thinks she may pick and choose, with her fortune," she remarked.

"I think Miss Merrion would be certain of admiration, without her fortune," was Greville's opinion.

A shadow came over his host's face, and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Nobody will have a fortune in a short time, if things go on as at present," he said, snappishly. "Nothing which pays more than two-and-a-half seems safe nowadays."

"Frederick has been terribly mean lately," said his wife, tranquilly. "I find it so hard to get money out of him; he says the rate of interest is so low."

"Hard times, no doubt," said Greville, with the amused indifference of a man who has never known the want of money, and thinks such complaints a mild kind of joke.

Certainly Mrs. Frederick Merrion had not a poverty-stricken aspect. She looked very sumptuous altogether, as she sat at the head of her table, the soft radiance of clustered wax-lights falling upon her.

"Hope does not spend a tenth of her income, of course," she said.

"All the better for her, later on," said her husband, sharply. "I cannot think why you should make it your business to urge her to spend more."

"Gracious, Fred! I don't!" she replied, in very great astonishment at his unaccustomed tone.

The pause which followed was interrupted by the entrance of a quiet ladylike girl in spectacles, who wore morning dress. She seemed a little out-of-place in the gilded drawing-room of the showy house which the Merrions had taken furnished for the season.

"Come in, Miss Thorpe," said Mrs. Merrion, "and have some fruit;" but she cast a reproving glance from the plain, blue-serge dress to the visitor.

"I am sorry, I must not wait," said Miss Thorpe, in a gentle voice, coming up to the lady where she sat. "I came to ask you to come upstairs and look at Guy, if you have time before you go out, for he seems quite poorly."

A look of annoyance passed over Mrs. Merrion's handsome face.

"It would have been better to wait," she said, coolly. "I am coming upstairs directly."

Without saying more, the young governess went out of the room as quietly as she had entered it.

"What's wrong?" asked Fred, to whose ear the soft tones had not penetrated.

"Guy has over-eaten himself again, apparently. It is astonishing how greedy that boy is ; but there was scarcely any need to come and announce it publicly. Miss Thorpe is prone to make too much fuss about the children."

"A good fault, isn't it ?" said Greville.

"Yes, she is exceedingly trustworthy," said his host, with decision. "Otherwise, I should not consent to this going away and leaving the children in her charge at Dalby Sands."

"Children are always better and happier in charge of their nurses and governesses than with their parents," asserted Mrs. Merrion calmly ; "they are so much less indulged. Guy is always seedy when away with us, because Fred will allow him to sit up so late and give him such unwholesome food."

The guest was too profoundly ignorant, perhaps also too indifferent on the subject of education, to question this assertion. He finished his coffee with a sense of having been very much bored by the conversation all dinner-time, except the few remarks which related to Hope, and which had most certainly afforded him food for reflection. He decided to go out upon the pier with Mr. Merrion, hoping to find it easier to extract some information from the husband when relieved from the presence of the handsome, vapid wife who demanded so much attention.

Accordingly, the two gentlemen sallied forth together into the starry night, among the strolling throngs of people, and so to the pier, where still the sad notes of the German waltz were borne upon the brine-laden air.

Greville was in a mood to-night to like stars and breaking waves, and sentimental band music. His thoughts were with Hope—this strange Hope who preferred scrambling about in Norshire to all the elegance of a tour on the continent and the best hotels !

She had been engaged, and had broken her engagement. Was it just dimly, wildly possible that the

thought of him, Gilbert Greville, remained with her and had influenced her? The sweetness of such a train of thought was dangerous. He turned to his silent companion and began to question him, easily leading round the conversation into the direction he desired.

Fred Merrion was only too glad to talk of his sister to Greville. He wished Hope to marry, and to marry well. Greville was a thoroughly nice fellow, and a rich fellow into the bargain. Hope's brother was as communicative as her lover could wish.

"Molyneux Lyster!" cried Greville, with a start, "Why, I know him. That is, he is a relation of my family: but I thought his wife's loss had turned his brain, and that he received no visitors. A shooting-party there! Very good moor, too, so I hear, I have a great mind to invite myself."

"Well, I don't know that I should advise your doing that," said Fred, doubtfully. "You see, he does not receive visitors, except these young Saxons; you might not be welcome. Better come on the continent with my sister, my wife, and me."

The prudent brother was by no means sure that what he called the "hoyden element" in Hope would be approved by the well-bred Greville. He, himself, would have found none of his sympathies appealed to had he met Hope after her mushrooming expedition at Hesselburgh, for instance. Bertha never wanted to do anything in the least unconventional; it would be better for Hope to be under her chaperon age when wooed by so eligible a suitor, not running wild in her old clothes, heated with tennis, muddy with exercise, or torn with climbing.

There were two Hope Merrions; the attractive heiress, who dressed irreproachably and kept her lovers at a distance, and the Hope beloved of Tom, who never stood upon her dignity.

To the first of these only had Greville been introduced; whether he suspected the existence of the latter, was a problem too hard for Fred to solve.

"But is Miss Merrion coming to Switzerland with you?" said the inquirer, persistently.

"I have written to tell her she ought."

"Ah! will that prove an inducement, do you expect?"

Fred laughed.

"It may; she is a very good girl at heart, though she is a little self-willed, but she was left an orphan so young."

Greville said little more. He had learned all that he was likely to learn from two people so little fitted to understand Hope's aims or motives.

He said good-night soon, and sauntered back to his hotel, his thoughts lulled by the soothing murmur of the waves.

"If I want to go and stay there," he said to himself, as he turned on the threshold for a last look at the night, "the best thing I can do is to go without an invitation."

Meanwhile, Bertha had slowly transported herself to the upper regions of the large house on the esplanade. She looked into the schoolroom, but it was empty. The lamp burned beside Miss Thorpe's vacant chair and full work-basket. The stout and languid beauty moved on into the boy's bedroom. Here, in the darkest corner, Wilf was asleep, his curly head burrowed down among the sheets, his body twisted like a corkscrew. Opposite, a candle had been placed on the corner of the mantelpiece, and, by its light, the governess sat at Guy's bedside, busy repairing some damage to the limbs of Adela's doll.

Guy himself lay on his back, with patiently wide-awake eyes, his arms raised over his head, and his gaze fixed upon the fantastic shadows cast by said arms upon the ceiling.

The apparition of Mrs. Merrion, in full evening toilette in the night nurseries, was so unusual that the child started up in bed.

"My stars! There's mamma!" he cried.

"Lie down, Guy dear," said his governess, gently.

"Well, there does not seem to me to be much the matter with him, he is lively enough," said Bertha, standing by the bed.

"He is feverish," said Miss Thorpe, a trifle indignantly.

His mother took his hand in one of hers.

"Feverish! Not very," she remarked, carelessly.

"Mamma," said Guy, twisting over upon his elbow, "how old do you suppose Brian de Bois Guilbert was?"

"Bless me, Guy, don't be so idiotic! What have you been eating to-day?"

"He has had very simple food all day; I took good care of that," said Miss Thorpe. "But, after tea, he seemed so excited, I put him to bed."

"It was humbug, I didn't want to go," sighed the patient, restlessly. "I shouldn't have gone if I hadn't been a Templar."

"What did you eat yesterday?" demanded his mother, not to be deterred by any attempt to force the conversation into other channels.

"Oh, I don't know; Wilf and me bought some bulls-eyes. I say, mamma, how much did your necklace cost? Did papa give it you?"

"You know he did. I think, Miss Thorpe——"

"Well, didn't he tell you how much it cost? Was it as much as a thousand pounds? Do tell me, mamma."

"Be quiet, Guy; you will waken Wilf."

"Well, he's not asleep really, he's only foxing. But I do wish you'd tell me if Brian de Bois Guilbert was older than Ivanhoe. Because Wilf is such a young idiot, he says he wasn't; and as we are Templars——"

"Have you given him anything to throw him into a perspiration?" asked Mrs. Merrión of her governess.

"Yes, some sweet spirits of nitre."

"Is Aunt Hope's necklace more *valubler* than yours, mamma?"

"No, Guy, certainly not."

"Well, couldn't you lend yours to Adela when we play at Torquilstone, because she is Rowena? Miss Thorpe is Rebecca, 'cause she's dark, and we've got a beautiful handkerchief for her head that Theresa's brother in the Marines brought from Madras. Oh, I say, mamma, I am so *beastly* hot! I really *can't* get to sleep!"

"You will go to sleep directly if I take away the light and Miss Thorpe," replied his mother, authoritatively. "Lie down now, and let us have no more nonsense. I expect you to be asleep in ten minutes. Good-night!"

"Oh, I say, mamma, don't leave me in the dark. My head is so full of thoughts to-night, I know I shall stay awake. If you will leave Miss Thorpe, I will promise, honour bright, to go to sleep—at least, I won't say one more word."

"Do you know that it's past ten o'clock, Guy? Be reasonable. If we go away, you will be asleep in a moment."

"That's all you know about it. I shall wake up Wilf and talk to him if you leave me alone."

"If you do, I shall report you to your father," said his mother, severely, as she took up the light.

Guy burst into tears, rolling his flushed face over into the pillows to hide such disgrace.

"You *are* unkind," he sobbed.

"Don't you see he is unwell?" said Miss Thorpe, in an agitated whisper to Mrs. Merrion. "He is much too manly to cry unless he felt ill."

"Rubbish! He is spoilt!" was the somewhat angry answer. "You really make too much fuss of him, Miss Thorpe."

She carried away the candle, and Miss Thorpe followed her into the passage.

"I think Guy ought to see a doctor," said the girl, in a low voice, but firmly. "He is very far from well."

"Do you think he is sickening for something? Oh, nonsense," said Bertha, yawning. "He is always

pretending to be ill. He is such a cunning child. Keep him on plain food to-morrow, and he will be all right. He is the sort of boy it is fatal to make a fuss with."

"I assure you, Mrs. Merrion, he is not pretending——"

"My dear Miss Thorpe, when I think the doctor necessary, I will send for him."

She walked off, her silken robes rustling down the staircase, and Mabel Thorpe looked after her, with an expression in her eyes very like contempt.

"And you are a mother!" she murmured to herself, with a shrug of her thin shoulders.

A stifled sob from the bedroom smote her ear. She crept in, knelt down by the bed, took the slight form of the boy in her arms, and softly kissed his wet face.

"Oh, you will stay here, won't you?" pleaded the Templar.

"My brave boy knows I can't, if mamma says no. Now, you are going to show what a good Knight Templar you are, by obeying an order you don't like."

"Mamma isn't the Grand Master; you are."

"Yes, and I tell you to be brave, and to obey. I know you will. I will give you a drink of this milk and soda, and then you will go off to sleep."

"Darling Miss Thorpe, you and Aunt Hope are the two nicest people in the world. I wish Aunt Hope was here!"

"So do I," thought Mabel, with a sigh, "for I know he ought to see a doctor."

CHAPTER XVII.

FORLORN HOPE.

God's in His heaven !
All's right with the world !

R. BROWNING.

THE sunniest peace brooded over the old fruit-garden at Leaming-le-Moor—the Pleasaunce, as they called it.

Its mellow red walls seemed to radiate heat and to smell of sunshine, as Leo Forde remarked.

Over the tops of them could be seen the boughs of the orchard, heavy with ripening fruit. This part of the garden had been Muriel's idea of perfect bliss ever since she could remember. It was separated from the flower-garden and tennis-lawns by an intricate labyrinth of shabby, painted doors in high walls, by a profusion of hot-houses, an untidy accumulation of green-houses, and a wilderness of strawberry-beds, peas, scarlet-runners, celery-trenches, and potatoes.

The particular piece of ground in question was open to every sunbeam, sheltered from every unkind blast. It was carpeted with immemorial turf, mossy and golden. From the great shady lime in the corner still hung the old swing, put up in nursery days for Tom and his sister. There was the summer-house where they had consumed so many strawberries of their own gathering ; there the fruit-trees which they had planted, the borders which they had cultivated with wooden spades. It had been an outdoor nursery for them.

The air was sweet with scents of the old-fashioned

flowers which bloomed around—the monthly roses on the summer-house, the wall-flowers, mignonette, southernwood, and sweet-briar, and, along the sunniest wall, the bed of violets which, except in the depth of winter, was scarcely ever searched in vain. From the only side of this charmed spot where the outer world was not excluded by red walls was to be seen the loveliest view attainable in the neighbourhood. The village rose upon a tolerably steep hill, and at the top, picturesquely set off by clumps of trees, the steeple of the church soared into misty air. Farther off, the purple moors rolled into the distance, and melted into the purple horizon.

Muriel was taking advantage of this glorious spell of weather to sketch her impression of this scene in water-colours. Leo, with less ability, but more zeal, was laboriously following her example. Hope, who could not sketch at all, was curled up on the turf, half-shaded by a red umbrella, deep in a very delightful novel, and almost oblivious of their surroundings.

The three graces, as Mollie had named them, were left to their own devices for the day, it being impossible for them to take lunch to the sportsmen, as the cart was gone to the station, twelve miles distant, to fetch Richard Forde, and the carriage-horses were on loan to the vicar and his wife, to enable them to spend a day in the town. The girls were, if anything rather pleased with a few hours' quiet, so rife with picnics and junketings had the last few days been.

Nothing could be more idyllic than life at Leaming. The glorious free air of the moorland seemed to act upon them all like a charm. Evelyn Westmorland had apparently laid aside his moroseness; he was no longer monosyllabic and chilling. Whether it really was the air, or whether the little adventure of the *tableaux vivants* had broken down some barrier, or whether the absence of his father released him from a strain, or whether his newly-formed resolution

towards matrimony had softened him—who shall say?

The result was evident, whatever the cause. When Mr. Lyster invited Leo to join the party to the moors, Evelyn had resolved to go too, and had been so strangely gentle and obliging that several times Tom had remarked to Hope that he was really afraid something was wrong with the old Major. Hope had little share in the change. They were able to pair off more freely at Leaming than had been possible at Hesselburgh, and Evelyn was always Leo's cavalier, while Hope and Tom were together as of yore.

Leo took considerable pleasure in this arrangement—firstly, because she was very young, and felt all the importance of being noticed by Major Westmorland; secondly, because, when at first he had so pointedly neglected her, she had determined to make him notice her, and so enjoyed her triumph; thirdly, because it was great fun to hear this silent person laugh, as he was most prone to do, at her nonsense; and lastly, with a lurking thought in her mind of Mr. Sayers Hancock and the Norchester tea-parties. How far away they all seemed now! No wonder that poor Leo's head was a trifle turned—that she was almost out of her depth. Her promotion had been so very rapid.

Mr. Saxon had sent them all to Leaming on his drag, and when that drag had dashed down Minster-gate in the morning sunshine, Tom Saxon holding the reins, with Miss Merrion at his side, Mr. Lyster beaming, with Miss Saxon behind, and a place reserved for her by the Major, it was impossible to avoid feeling somewhat, however little, "*tête montée*."

Life's realities had ceased to exist for her, just now. She was living in a dream.

Her excitement made her restless. Before very long, her brush was thrown down on the mossy turf at her feet, and she was stretching out her graceful young limbs with a sigh of weariness.

"What is the use of trying?" she said, despondingly. "I can't do it as you can, Muriel!" for the three girls now used each other's Christian names. "How pretty that is! Your spire stands out so well!"

"So would yours, if you sponged your sky a little."

"It is all dry," said Leo, with an impatient shake, "as dry as the dean's sermons!"

Hope, from her nest in the turf, laughed faintly, and looked up.

"Take a lesson from Muriel," said she, contemplating that young lady's industry. "Patience on a monument!"

"It is always a work of much difficulty," remarked Muriel, peaceably, "to induce me to begin anything, but when I do begin, I always finish, if I can."

Hope sat up, and clasped her hands round her knees.

"An excellent maxim," said she. "Now, I am all beginnings and no endings. But that is a profitless theme for discussion. What now, Leo?"

Leo was collecting her painting materials, with the somewhat inefficient aid of Prim, a nervous fox terrier, who always felt himself expected to take a very prominent part in whatever might be going forward.

"I think I shall go and practice on the organ at church for an hour," said she.

"Will Billy be there to blow?"

"I told him yesterday that I should very likely be coming this afternoon."

"Suppose I come, in case he shouldn't turn up?"

"It would be very kind of you," said Leo, gratefully.

"I should like a walk," said Hope, closing her book. "My hero and heroine have started on their wedding journey, and become utterly uninteresting. It is extraordinary how wild my interest becomes just before the climax, and how completely it collapses afterwards!"

"So does mine," agreed Leo. "But, if you and I start off, we shall leave Muriel alone."

"I am more than content, thank you. I shall go steadily on at this, as long as the light lasts. In fact, I shall be rather glad to be rid of you both. Be off!"

After a little more delay, they presently started. No change in their costume was necessary; to meet a stranger in the dusty winding lane that led past the church to the moor would have been almost as astonishing as to encounter one rambling in the walled Pleasaunce. Leaming was as solitary as it was sunny and sleepy.

"Is it not pleasant," said Hope, dreamily, "to be here? Such rest—such ease! Nobody here is pretending to be richer, or cleverer, or nobler than they really are; there is no bustle, no struggle to keep pace with the times, or with one's social rival in the next street. It is such peace!"

"If you will not mind my saying so," said Leo, in her frank way, "it seems rather surprising, somehow, to hear you speak of peace and rest as you do. I don't feel as if I quite sympathised. I like life and action, plenty of it. I was brought up at Sandwater—such a dull place! Everything seemed to *creep* along, and I hated it! What you call rest sounds to me like stagnation."

"I daresay you are right, Leo," answered Hope, after a minute's reflection. "I believe it is an affectation on my part to talk so. I dislike stagnation as much as you do. But I suppose there are times in one's life when one is glad to rest, when one grows weary!"

"I like this nice sleepy place, very much," continued Leo, "I feel the charm of it. But, when I come to question myself honestly, I know quite well that it is the people, this nice house-party, which makes up the charm for me. If I were here all alone, or with Mrs. Hancock, for instance, I know I should be very—oh, extremely dull, however purple the moors might be."

"To question yourself honestly!" repeated Hope, following up her own train of thought. "I have often done, or tried to do that, but have I ever given myself an honest answer? I think that is the difficulty!"

She spoke more to herself than to the girl beside her; and the latter neither understood nor replied.

"I think I have been spoilt, all my life, Leo," resumed Hope, after a little silence, "for, do you know, I never knew till lately what it is like to feel so totally, deeply dissatisfied with myself."

"Ought one to feel so?" asked Leo, wonderingly.

"I don't know. If you know yourself thoroughly, I suppose yourself ought never to come upon you as a surprise," was Hope's somewhat involved theory. "But I think I have never known myself at all, or thought of life as I ought to think of it. I should like to be of use to somebody before I die."

"I should think," timidly suggested Leo, "that, if you go wrong at all, it is by thinking too much, and not too little."

Hope laughed out merrily and suddenly.

"I am a goose," said she; "thank you for stopping me, you charitable person! If there is one characteristic that I despise more than another, it is a tendency to bewail one's own deficiencies aloud. And really," she concluded, panting a little with the steepness of the ascent, "if we ever reach the top of this hill, we shall have nothing left to wish for."

They went on in silence for a time, all their energies needed by the climb.

Once they stopped for a rest, and leaned over a gateway gazing into a clover-field.

A lark shot up, almost from their feet, sailed aloft into the radiant air, and sang as English larks will sing, "for joy o' the summer sun."

"How different this side of the hill is from the other!" said Hope. "This warm, cultivated south slope, and just over the brow is the frowning, treacherous, desolate moor!"

"How dreadful it looked the other day, with that rainstorm driving over it," chimed in Leo. "It was so strange to stand, as we did, in a gleam of sunshine, and watch the black clouds burst upon the heath in torrents."

"It was like my life," asserted Hope, who was evidently not to be withheld from moralising to-day, even with the strongest resolution to the contrary.

"I stand smiling in the sunshine, and thinking that all the world is enjoying it too. But it is only just a gleam, just a gleam that shines on a few of us. That!" with a dramatic gesture of her expressive hand, "that is the world! that dark, lonely, tempestuous moor, where the clouds hang so low that they hide each other's faces from us! Oh, that moor! It is terrible! I don't want to think of it!"

She hid her face.

Leo was very much mystified. Her idea of Hope, so far, had been that she was gayest of the gay: Tom's willing coadjutor in any nonsense that might be suggested. To understand was impossible, but to sympathise came most naturally to her quick feelings. She bent towards her companion, put her arm round her waist, and kissed her softly.

"You dear little thing," said Hope, impulsively. "I do hope you will be happy. You, at last, have nothing to regret! But I have! I made a terrible **mistake once**. I thought it was over and done with, and that I had, so to speak, put everything to rights again, and freed myself. But, do you know, Leo, I seem not to be able to get rid of it. Something is always happening, quite unexpectedly, to bring it all back so vividly; it was so at Hesselburgh, it is so again, here. I was the cause of a great wrong being done, the most unintentional cause, but still the cause. Sometimes I feel as if the weight was too heavy to bear, because—because that wrong can never be righted now. Never, never! It is too late!" She was sobbing as she spoke. "Think what it would be, Leo, to stand up for a while in the sunshine, and

hope and believe that it would last : and then to have to wander away far out into that bleak moor, into cold, poisonous fens and lonely valleys of rocks, in darkness, misery, and clouds. Into the land not inhabited, the desert, the awful loneliness ; to be *quite* alone, and for no one to understand. And to die there, silent and unknown, with nobody to hear your bitter cry. Can you imagine anything more terrible ? ”

There was a little silence, and then Leo said, very shyly,

“That was what Christ suffered, was it not ? ” and then, receiving no answer, went on, hesitatingly, “I remember hearing my uncle say, in one of his sermons, that it was the awful loneliness which made the worst part of the human agony of Jesus.—‘*I have trodden the wine-press alone, and of the people there was none with Me.*’—You see, nobody could possibly sympathise with Him, because nobody else knew what sin was, or could know it——”

“Go on,” said Hope, feverishly, as the young voice faltered.

“—And my uncle said,” slowly proceeded Leo, thus encouraged, “that it is that very loneliness which He endured that makes Him so able to sympathise with us ; and you know, Hope, it goes on in that same chapter to say : ‘*So He was their Saviour : in all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His Presence saved them.*’ ”

“What chapter is it ? ” asked Hope, in a subdued voice.

“The sixty-third of Isaiah. I remember that sermon so well, because the text was an odd one ; and you quoted it just now, ‘A land not inhabited.’ About the poor scapegoat, you know.”

“The scapegoat ! ”

“Yes ; you remember they sent it away alone into the desert.”

“I remember,” said Hope, resting her elbows on the gate, and her chin in her hands. “I never thought

of it like that before. Is your uncle a very good man?"

"Yes, he is. He said, too, that loneliness is, if you come to think of it, the worst of all sorrows: and moral loneliness worse than bodily."

"I wish I had heard the sermon," said Hope.

"I can't repeat it at all well," said Leo, humbly, "and I think there was a great deal of it which I did not take in, because, you see, I have never had many troubles of my own. But I know he said that Christ died that no human soul might ever be left alone again: and so they called Him Emmanuel—'God with us.'"

The solemn young voice died away in the calm of the golden afternoon. Exhausted with his own rapture, the lark dropped down to his meadow nest, and his song was hushed. So still was everything, that the girls could hear the baby breeze that whispered in the hedgerows.

"God with us," repeated Hope. "How strange it is that one may hear some texts for years and years, and never find any particular meaning in them; then it comes to you all of a sudden. Leo, you have done me good."

"I am so glad," said Leo, warmly. "I was so afraid you would think it unnatural, or canting, to quote a text."

"I shouldn't like it if you were always doing it, it would lose its effect," said Hope, smiling, though her lashes were wet; "but you knew the right time to say it; and, oh! Leo," lifting her eyes to the blue depths above, "God does seem very near just now."

Both girls were silent, and perhaps some imperfect, faltering petition went up through the peaceful air from their hearts to the Infinite Love which brooded over them.

When they resumed their road, no word was spoken to break the holy spell, until they stood on the hill-top by the little grey lych-gate of the old Norman church.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A LONELY GRAVE.

Strew on her roses—roses,
With never a spray of yew.
In quiet she reposes,
Ah! would that I did too!

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

HERE Prim, who had accompanied them on their walk, ran forward, with delighted yelpings, and as they lifted the latch, darted into the churchyard, and could be heard giving a vociferous welcome to some friend hidden by the angle of the church wall.

A moment more, and Major Westmorland came into view, walking towards them bareheaded in the sunshine that flooded the summit of the hill.

Hope's first feeling was of vexation; her eyelids were red. Her next, of consolation; red or green the Major would never notice them.

Evelyn looked very handsome and erect and manly as he met them.

"How did you get here?" cried Leo, shaking off her solemnity as lightly as she might have done a drop of rain. "Have you not been shooting?"

"Yes—until an hour ago, then I remembered that you were to be practising this afternoon and, I thought I would be in readiness in case your blower failed."

"How very kind!" cried the girl, with a fine blush. "But did Billy not come?"

"He is not here," returned the Major, looking round him with a guilty air which convinced Hope that Billy had duly attended, and been bribed to make himself scarce.

The thought caused her a strange consternation.

Several ideas rushed across her mind almost simultaneously. The Major was in love with Leo. It had before been obvious that he admired her, and sought her society, but in some vague way she felt that this last move looked like business. Evelyn's determined face was more determined than usual. Then, if these things were so, she, Hope, was most lamentably *de trop*. For a moment she felt undecided.

"Hope was so very kind as to come with me in case Billy was not forthcoming," said Leo, as they strolled up the path.

"It is scarcely lady's work," said the Major.

"I gladly resign my task to abler hands," said Hope, with a gaiety she could not quite feel. "I shall stroll home again, I think."

"Oh, Hope! then you will have had all this hot walk for nothing."

"Oh, no, Leo! not for nothing," was the answer, with a sweet smile which was considerably tinged with the shadow of their late solemnity. "Indeed, I have liked it—it has done me good."

They stood by the porch, the three of them. On the worn stone bench within lay the Major's cap and gun. Through the closed wire doors the colours of the east window showed in subdued tones. Had the Major not been there, Hope would have liked to go and kneel in the dusky coolness, and ease her present sense of inadequacy and failure. It was a new thing in her, this humility, this longing to pray. As it was, she had to smile, and nod, and say lightly.

"I will say good-bye now. I suppose you will both be back in time for dinner."

"I will take care of her," said Evelyn, with a downward glance at the white-robed Leo.

"I shall take a few minutes' rest before starting," went on Hope, her eyes turning involuntarily to the unbroken purple sweep of moor lying now at her feet.

"Go in and play, Leo. I will stay outside and listen."

"Have you ever tried organ-blowing?" asked Leo of her tall companion.

He shook his head doubtfully.

"My experience is not large," he smilingly answered. "So much I candidly confess."

"I will tell you a funny little story," said she, leaning against the porch. "My uncle at Sandwater had a blower who was blind, and a lady in the parish said to this blind man that she thought it very wonderful that he should never let the wind out, as he could not see the indicator. 'Well, you see, miss,' he replied, 'I come of a very musical family.'"

The Major's rare laugh sounded pleasantly.

Hope sat down silently in the porch, and Leo laid upon her lap the bouquet of honeysuckle she had gathered in the hedges.

"Will you carry it for me?" she said; "they will die before I can put them in water."

The two entered the church, and Hope heard the little clatter attendant on the opening of the organ, and the seating of the performer.

The organ was a present to the church from Mollie, at Muriel's instigation, on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday.

Its tone was sweet and mellow, and to day sounded strangely stirring to Hope. For some minutes she leaned back motionless, the sunshine gilding her loose hair and white dress, and gleaming through the leaves and flowers in her hand. She did not know that, as she so sat, she was visible to the blower standing at his post, nor that his gaze was fixed upon her, whether he would or not.

"O rest in the Lord," prayed Leo, with tender sweetness. Hope could fit in the words to the well-known strain, and followed the melody as it flowed on.

"Commit Thy way unto Him, and trust in Him : and He shall give thee thy heart's desire—and He shall give thee thy heart's desire."

A golden mist swam in her eyes, and blotted out the scene. Hastily she rose, and left the porch, but not the churchyard. With tears, which now she could

not repress, she walked on, among the graves, passing indifferently all those on the warm southern slope of the hill, and not pausing till she reached the bleaker northern half of the burying-ground.

Here she dashed away the drops which prevented her from seeing clearly, and looked searchingly around.

The aspect of the moor to-day was gentle, sunny, and beguiling, basking in the broad light of the unclouded sky. Lonely it still was, and must ever be, but there was now a beauty in its very loneliness—a majesty which seemed to consecrate these obscure graves, and lift them up, away from the everyday world into a Sabbath of boundless rest.

A white marble cross caught her eye, and she went straight up to it, cast one look, and knelt beside it.

To the beloved Memory of
NELLIE WETHERELL,
who entered into rest May 1st, 18—,
Aged 23.

Hope almost started when she read the words carved beneath: for they were those which Leo had repeated as they leaned over the gate.

“In all their affliction, He was afflicted and the Angel of His Presence saved them.”

The organ pealed out tenderly yet triumphantly, and it seemed to Hope as if a voice sang in its strains:

“And he shall give thee thy heart’s desire!”

Flinging her arms impulsively about the cross, Hope wept as in all her life she had not wept before.

“Oh, Nellie! Nellie!” she gasped aloud to the sleeping girl under the turf, “I am glad you are at rest, dear,—I would not call you back. Oh, Nellie, I am so glad God has given you your heart’s desire, and that I need not think of you any more with that look in your eyes, that stricken look that was so terrible to see! But oh, Nellie, if you could come back just for an instant, and tell him! Just speak one word

to tell him that he misjudges me, and that I did right, as well as I could ! It is so hard—so *hard* to be misjudged ! He is patient and kind to every one else—only harsh to me ! Nellie, I can sympathise with you ; I know what you had to bear ! The bitter trouble that ate your heart out and that nobody must know I wonder if you can hear me, in Paradise, and feel for me, now that you are so happy ? Oh, help me, I am so lonely, I feel as if I could not bear it ! ”

The broken voice died away : only the kneeling girl still clung to the cross, shaking it with the storm of her sobs.

The organ notes sank away softly into silence, and, after a few minutes' pause, there pealed out the “ March of the Silver Trumpets.” Gradually Hope's emotion subsided ; her ebullition of feeling was over, yet she did not move, but after a while she sank down into a sitting position, her head against the marble, and still, as if exhausted.

The chiming of the clock roused her at last, and taking up Leo's bunch of honeysuckle, she wove it into a little wreath which she hung upon the cross, and then kissed the letters of the name.

“ Good-bye, Nellie,” she whispered.

She was glad she had been there ; it comforted her. She could feel now that this girl's sufferings had been short, if sharp, and that God had indeed given her her heart's desire when He laid her to sleep upon the hillside. And the words carved upon her grave seemed to show that she had rightly understood her trouble, and, going through the vale of misery, had used it for a well.

She walked quietly home in the dusk, the evening wind fanning her hot face and swollen lids, and a strange peace resting upon her soul. She felt and knew that such peace could not last ; she was almost sure that the course of a few days would bring a new pain : the engagement of Major Westmorland to Leo Forde. But, for to-night, such thoughts were to be

done away, and she would remain folded close, as it seemed, in the comforting arms of nature, in the beauty and consecration of the summer sunset.

The wheel marks on the gravel sweeps of the Manor House gave token that Richard Forde had arrived. In the hall was a group still lingering around the gipsy tea-table. The dogs set up a chorus of welcome as she entered, and, as heads were turned, she saw that there were two new arrivals.

There were Tom and Mollie, dishevelled and fatigued in their shooting gear; the young doctor, fresh and neat in his summer travelling suit, sitting by Muriel and "engineering the spirit-kettle," as Tom said; and there was some one else, who rose as she entered, with a look almost of agitation in his usually calm eyes; some one whom she expected to see as little as any one on earth at that moment. Mr. Greville, their pleasant travelling companion of last summer.

"Well," she cried, after an astonished little pause, coming forward and laying down her parasol.

"Did you not expect to see me?" asked Forde, shaking hands.

"You? Yes! But——"

"I must introduce you, Hope, my dear; a cousin of mine who is most kindly and unexpectedly going to give us the pleasure of his company."

"There is no need of an introduction, dear Mollie. I know Mr. Greville."

"Dear me! Well, to be sure! How small the world is!" cried Mollie, genially. "This makes your visit still more opportune, Greville! Really most pleasant! But quite a coincidence, is it not, to meet in this exceedingly remote spot."

"It is unexceptionally good fortune for me," replied Greville, looking at Hope.

He thought her a little altered since last year: a shade thinner, a shade paler, with less mischief and more soul in her expression. The indescribable charm of her personality was stronger than ever. Her engagement, he imagined, had perhaps caused her some

keen pain, or regret ; but it had not broken either her heart or her spirit. He thought he had never looked upon so attractive a being.

Hope, meanwhile, was wondering to herself whether or not she was glad to see him ; and was quite unable to give herself an answer. She had liked him, last year, well enough to think of him several times after their parting, until the novelty and excitement of her voyage to Ceylon drove him clean out of her happy, thoughtless head.

She had indeed changed, since then ; learned to think so much more gravely of the admiration she had been wont to accept so carelessly and lightly.

"Nice of you two," observed Muriel, placidly, "to go off and leave me to make tea for all this multitude ! Where is Leo ?"

"I left her playing the organ," said Hope, sinking into a chair, and laying down her gloves on a table near ; and, after a momentary hesitation, added, "Major Westmorland is blowing for her."

"Oh !" said Muriel, with a sudden wide opening of her big blue eyes ; and Tom cried, as might have been expected :

"That was what made the old Major take himself off so early, was it ?"

There was a little pause ; everybody seemed to be digesting a new idea. Richard Forde rose, and went to the open door to see if the missing couple were in sight.

"They will be too late for tea," remarked Mollie, as he handed Hope hers.

"This is a magnificent country, Mr. Lyster," said Richard, when his survey proved vain.

"Surprisingly so," said Greville, turning to Mollie. "Had I had any idea of its beauty, I am afraid I should have burned to make my cousin's acquaintance long ago."

"I am so overjoyed," said Mollie, "that your first visit should be so opportune. I am terribly dull, except when any young people are with me."

“You are certainly not dull now,” said Greville, with a pleasant smile of much satisfaction at the party of good-looking young people around him.

The spell of Leaming-le-Moor had already fallen on the newcomer. He felt an indescribable happiness and peace stealing over him, as the garden scents reeked in through the purple twilight, the larchwoods hung motionless in the still air, and Tom and the dogs kept up an undertone of joyous romping on the leopard-skins that carpeted the hall.

“Come, dear,” said Muriel, putting her arm through Mollie’s, “come and get your buttonhole.”

This was a daily function when Muriel was at Leaming; every morning and every evening was the delighted Mollie provided with a fresh flower for his coat. She herself was always obliged to throw away the dead one when presenting the next; nothing would have induced him to discard a blossom of her giving, and the servants said that, when she went away, he always wore the last one until it dropped from his buttonhole.

Richard looked longingly at the two, as they passed out of the hall, and Muriel took pity on him.

“Come, you shall have one, too,” said she; so they went together.

“Shall I get you one, duckie?” asked Tom, rolling two of the puppies into Hope’s lap.

“Maréchal Niels, please, Tom; and one for Mr. Greville, too.”

She smiled as Tom went off.

“Evening dress is quite a function here,” she said. “Mr. Lyster has a weakness for seeing his ladies in full ‘toilette.’ Miss Saxon and I brought almost every evening gown we had, and he examines each new one with fresh delight.”

“I am glad you prepared me—I shall expect to be quite taken off my feet,” said Greville, amused. “Your friend, Miss Saxon, is charming, and they tell me Miss Forde is also handsome.”

“Yes, very.”

"It is a sort of enchanted castle of beauty. You will be sorry to leave it."

"Yes, very."

After a moment's hesitation,

"I was at Eastbourne last week, and dined with your people," he said,— "Mr. and Mrs. Merrion."

He had decided that he must tell her this, as she would very likely hear it from either her brother or his wife, and wonder at his concealing it.

"Oh!" she said, after a little pause, "they start for Switzerland to-morrow, I believe."

"Yes. Your brother told me he was very anxious for you to accompany them, but I imagine you have decided against it."

"Certainly! Am I not wise? Leave this delightful place for noisy *tables-d'hôte*, hot hotels, mobs of people whom I do not care to see? No, indeed! I shall stay here as long as ever I can."

"My sympathies are entirely with you," he replied, cordially; "one feels the charm of this place at once on arriving."

"You don't know half its attractions until you have dreamed away a morning in the Pleasaunce, or ridden over the moors at a gallop," she answered, smiling.

"There is a wonderful fascination about it all."

"There is," said Greville; but he was careful not to put too much feeling into his voice.

"Fred and Bertha were quite well, I conclude?" was her next remark.

"They seemed so, though I think your brother seemed a little overworked—worried by business."

"He is apt to be like that," replied Hope absently.

She did not press the matter further, but she knew, from a certain consciousness in Greville's manner, that he had heard she was staying at Leaming, and had come there to see her.

Was she glad, or sorry?

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MAJOR COMMITS HIMSELF.

I mistook my own heart, and that slip
Was fatal.

E. B. BROWNING.

THE beautiful afterglow, so much admired by those in the great hall at Leaming, was equally appreciated by Leo as she came out of the church and waited a moment while her attendant squire locked the great door behind them.

"How beautiful!" she sighed, with a tender, transfigured look in her large eyes; and then again, rapturously, "How beautiful!"

"It is," replied the Major, as he came and stood beside her.

The peacefulness of the distant hills beyond, and the quiet graves at their feet, seemed emblematic of the peace which he felt sure would come upon him now that he had made up his mind to obey his father, and marry—if he could.

"It is late! We must hurry home," said Leo.

"Must we? I want to linger," replied he.

"We shall be late for dinner," urged the lady.

"Will that distress you?" inquired the gentleman.

Leo hesitated, reddened, and at last said, candidly,

"I am afraid Dick will think I should not be out so late."

"I will make it right with Dick," said Evelyn, as he unfastened the lych-gate and let her through; and, as they began to walk down the hill together, he asked, in a low tone, "It is not because you dislike being with me?"

"No—oh, no!"

How could she? Was he not part, and the chief part, of her present extraordinary happiness? Had there not come upon her suddenly a crowd of those delights which she had been accustomed to think of as existing only in the pages of novels? Had she not found that, in real life, people enjoyed themselves, were pretty, were admired, visited at country-houses, and were favoured with fine weather? Had she not carried lunch to the guns, driven in a four-in-hand, and done several other things which girls in books so often did? It seemed only natural that, to all this, the culminating point should come: that, like the heroines of fiction, she should have a lover too! And yet she was uneasy—vaguely conscious of a discomfort for which she could find no name.

They walked for two or three minutes in a silence which, she instinctively felt, must be broken through.

"Dick will have arrived by now," she said in a voice striving to sound natural.

"Shall you be very glad to see him?"

With a little, unsteady laugh, she answered:

"You will think me very unnatural, but I shall not be quite as glad as usual, because it means—his coming—that my time here is drawing to an end. He cannot stay longer than a week at the outside, he says; and, when he goes back, I shall go with him."

"You will be sorry to leave this place?"

"How can you ask me? Very, very sorry!"

"And these people?"

"Yes," softly.

"Miss Forde," said the bashful Major, in a voice which seemed to come from his boots, "shall you be sorry to leave *me*?"

Had Leo been one shade less agitated and nervous she must have laughed; as it was, she knew not what to say, for the question was pointed by Evelyn's standing stock-still in the lane, and facing her.

"You—have always been very kind to me," she brought out at last.

"I think," he answered, thoughtfully, "that I

should not find it difficult to be kind to you—always.”

Absolutely no answer was possible to this; she could but wait.

“Will you let me try?” he asked, after a moment’s thrilling pause.

“Try?” echoed Leo, faintly, her knees knocking together.

“I don’t know whether I ought to ask it,” stammered the soldier, with shaking voice. “It seems so much—so much. I want you to promise to be with me—always: to be my . . . my wife. Will you?”

The steep lane, the green hedges, the glowing stars set in purple sky above, were rocking and reeling round the girl. She put out her hands to steady herself, and Evelyn took them in his own.

“Wait—wait—don’t answer—don’t distress yourself.”

His words seemed to come to her from a long way off, a roaring as of waves was in her ears. The soft little evening breeze blew tenderly over her face, and gradually the mists cleared away. She looked up into his eyes.

“You—said?” she whispered.

“I asked you to be my—in short, I offered myself to you,” he answered. Why did that word “wife” seem to stick in his throat?

“To me!” she repeated.

“I have never said such words to any other woman,” he said, speaking more manfully, now that the plunge was over. “I know I am a terribly unsatisfactory wooer—my nature is deficient in sentiment—in power of expression. I am a commonplace, hum-drum fellow, and perhaps I have no right to—to anything so young and bright as you. But, if you will trust me, I will try to take great care of you. If I can, I will make you happy. Will you say something to me?”

“What must I say?”

“What you feel—only that.”

"I—I—love you!" half sobbed the excited child, totally unconscious that he had made to her no similar declaration.

The flood-gates of her romantic girlish feeling were open. Had Evelyn caught her to his heart, and showered kisses upon her, it would have seemed right and natural, she would have understood and responded.

Nothing was further from her suitor's thoughts than such a line of conduct; he felt no impulse to do anything of the kind. He thanked her, gently and humbly, for the honour she had done him, and it seemed to Leo as if, just as she reached the door of Paradise, it had been closed in her face. An indefinable sense of want and loss crept over her, agitating her already overstrung nerves to the breaking-down point.

This moment, to which in girlish dreams she had looked forward—which she had imagined would be the crowning-point of her life—had it disappointed her? Like the other experiences of her short career, it had come upon her so unexpectedly, so suddenly. And it was not what she had fancied.

She burst into tears.

This roused all his masculine tenderness and sympathy. As a lover, he must be deficient, because he was acting a part; as a consoler, he followed the natural impulse of his soft heart, and success was the result.

He made her sit down by the roadside, on a hillock and sat down beside her, close beside her. He put his strong arm round her, held her hand, and begged her pardon for being so rough, so sudden. Could she not forgive him? Finally, after a long hesitation, he stooped, and kissed her rainy eyelids.

Sunshine came again. Leo was ashamed of having been so foolish. Was it likely that a grand, noble dignified creature like Major Westmorland could descend to demonstrations of affection, like ordinary beings!

She was quite distressed at her folly.

"Do you feel well enough to walk home?" he asked at last.

"Oh, yes!" She rose, and smiled at him. "I—I don't know what Dick will say," she faltered, with burning blushes.

"You must leave me to tell Dick. And there is some one else to be told, who will be more overjoyed than any one—my father."

"Oh, will he be pleased? Are you sure? Will he not think me much too insignificant for you?"

"He loves you; I happen to know it. He will be devoted to you. You have no father, and he no daughter. You must be great friends."

It was altogether too much to be believed. Was it really she, Leone Forde, lately emancipated from the schoolroom at Sandwater vicarage, but a few weeks ago patronised by the town ladies of Norchester? Was she to be the mistress of Feverell Chase, and to be received with wide open arms by the fastidious Mr. Westmorland himself?

Enid, when Prince Geraint took her from her culinary labours and rode with her to court, scarcely experienced a more sudden turn of fortune's wheel.

As Hope stood by her open bedroom window, slowly beginning to dress for dinner, the door opened and Muriel peeped in.

"May I come in for a moment?"

"Yes, of course."

Muriel approached the window, which overlooked the gravel sweep at the front of the house.

"Those two are not in yet," she remarked.

"No," returned Hope, busy over the arrangement of some lace on her gown.

After a considerable interval Miss Saxon remarked.

"You ought not to have left them, Hope."

"Well!" cried Hope, in tones of great amusement. "I like that! I am not so fond of playing gooseberry, thank you. I was so evidently not wanted."

"Leo is very young," replied Muriel, equably, "and I rather feel as if you and I were responsible for her. *Mater* didn't quite like her being asked, you know."

Hope did not answer.

"And I am afraid she might perhaps get her head turned by the Major's going about with her ; you see she can't know that he only does it to avoid us."

"You quite mistake the whole position of affairs," replied Hope, slowly. "Major Westmorland is going to propose to Leo Forde."

"Oh, nonsense, Hope!"

"You are quite free to call it so, if you please. Events will be my vindication."

"Here they come," said Muriel, suddenly, and remained, rooted to the window, watching.

It was too dark to see their faces. Evelyn let Leo through the gate, closed it, and came to her side. They passed very slowly up the path together, and Leo paused at one of the rose-trees, gathered a rose, and gave it to her companion. He took it and thanked her, apparently with much earnestness, and so, still talking, disappeared under the portico, and after an interval of silence, Leo's feet were heard flying along the corridor in the direction of her room.

"Well?" said Hope, who also had gone to the window.

"It is certainly very suspicious," acknowledged Muriel.

"Major Westmorland would never trifle with any woman, of that I am quite sure," said Hope in a low voice.

"I am of the same opinion ; but it is too absurd, too incongruous, the idea of a man like him, and a man who always set his face against matrimony, wanting to marry Leo!"

"Why is it absurd?"

"I don't know of any reason I could put into words ; but the idea of a marriage between those two is, to me, utterly incongruous."

Hope was silent.

"I suppose," observed Muriel, presently, "that he is marrying to please his father."

"What make his father so anxious for him to marry, Muriel?"

"Afraid of the family becoming extinct, I suppose. I believe they are the only two living representatives of the name."

"Dear me! How many disagreeable duties are entailed upon the owners of property!" sighed Hope.

"Such as marriage?"

"Such as marriage."

"It's a duty a good many people seem to find pleasant," remarked Muriel, dreamily.

"Yes, because they do it of their own accord; that is quite another thing. It is only if you have to do a thing that it becomes irksome."

"I daresay," said Muriel.

After a few more remarks, she departed, and Hope remained in the gloaming, standing by the window, without ringing for lights or her maid, though it wanted but twenty minutes to dinner-time.

The girl's proud eyes gazed out far away into the misty distance. At last she spoke—aloud.

"Yes," she said, "I am glad Gilbert Greville has come."

CHAPTER XX.

THE MAJOR BURNS HIS SHIPS.

This is a heart, the queen leant on,
 Thrilled in a moment erratic,
 Ere the true bosom she bent on
 Meet for love's regal dalmatic !
 O, what a moment ecstatic
 Was the poor heart's, ere the wanderer went on,
 Love to be saved for it, proffered to, spent on !
 R. BROWNING.

SCARCELY had her maid put the hasty finishing touches to Hope's attire, when there was a hurried rap on the door, and Leo ran in, her face scarlet, her eyes shining.

"Oh, Hope ! May I speak to you ?"

"Most certainly. You may go, Bowen."

The maid departed, and Hope turned to her visitor.

"What is it, dear ?" she asked, feeling suddenly much older than Leo, and as if her own youth lay wholly in the past.

Her visitor snatched up a hand-glass, and surveyed her scarlet cheeks.

"Oh, Hope, just look at my face ! I am afraid to go downstairs."

Hope lightly touched the hot face with her own cool fingers.

"You are hot," she said ; "you came in late, and were hurried ; but it will soon go off."

"Hope," cried Leo, catching her by the waist, "listen, dear ; I must speak to you. Sit down here by me on the sofa. I want to tell you something—you *will* listen, won't you ?"

"Yes, I will listen," answered Hope, rather faintly.

They sat down on the little sofa together—a lovely

picture, in the candlelight—the doctor's young sister, her youth, bloom, and style giving an air to the inexpensive white muslin she wore; and the London beauty, her bewitching little face and figure done full justice to by perfect hair-dressing, and the magical make of her yellow silken gown.

Leo was silent for a little, and then broke into laughter—laughter that was almost hysterical.

"It seems so strange—in a way, so ridiculous," she said, gasping a little. "Hope, did any one ever ask you to marry him? But, of course, I feel sure somebody must have asked you."

"Three people have asked me, Leo."

"Three! Oh, how can people live through such things! What did you say to them?"

"I said no the first two times. One wanted my money, and the other should not have dared to ask me; he deserved a setting-down, and he got it. The third time I said yes."

"You did? Then you have been engaged? Oh . . . !" with a long intonation of surprise, "then you broke it off?"

"Yes. I found I had made a mistake. He was splendid to look at, but he was not good—not true. I was to blame; I accepted him too soon, before I knew him well enough. It was the most miserable time of my life, Leo, and I want to forget it; fortunately it did not last long: three months after I saw him first, it was all over between us."

Leo surveyed her with curious interest. Then her whole face changed. Winding her arms round her, she hid her face against her neck.

"Hope," she whispered, trembling exceedingly, "do you think Major Westmorland is good?"

There was an eloquent silence in the room. Resentment sprang up hot and high in Hope Merrion's heart; her breath came fast. Could she not have her revenge on her enemy, if she chose, by poisoning Leo's mind against him? It was only an idle thought, it did not assume the magnitude of a temptation.

She would not be like him, unjust, blind to the merits of an adversary: he had condemned her unheard, but that could not make her ungenerous.

"Yes, Leo," she said softly, at last, "I believe he is good—very good; but stern—stern to himself and others. He makes no allowances; he is pitilessly just."

"He said—he said," gasped out Leo, "that he would be always kind to me."

After another pause, Hope said, and her voice would sound strained in spite of her,

"Has he told you he loves you, Leo?"

A scarcely audible assent.

"And you," proceeded Hope, "do you love him?"

"Oh, how can you ask? It is more worship than love that I feel! So high, and great, and stately—so much beyond any one I ever saw or heard of. Compare him with the men in Norchester—with the Minster clergy. He is almost like a person from another planet. I—reverence him."

A thought of Marion Erle crossed Hope's brain, and was indignantly repulsed. She hardly knew what to say to this outburst.

At last—

"Well it must be very beautiful," she said, quietly, "to be in love with a good man; there must be such a feeling of rest about it—of peace after wild storms." She broke off with a laugh. "There! I am drivelling again," she cried, "about rest, as if, at my time of life, I ought to dream of having deserved it!"

"And you feel, I suppose," she resumed, in a minute or two, "no fear at the idea of having to be with him all your life? He is such a companion, such a comrade to you; you are so utterly in sympathy with him. You feel that you were created to supply all his needs—that you are the stray half of him, which God sent him into the world to find——"

Leo sat up, with wide eyes.

"Oh, I don't feel like that!" she said, abruptly; but what more she would have said was drowned in

the clatter of the great bell. "Oh, Hope, Hope ! that is the bell ! What must I do ? How can I sit through dinner and look natural, if nobody knows ?"

"Far more easily, I should think, than you could if everybody knew."

"Do you think so ? Well, perhaps—yes. But you will come into the drawing-room with me, will you not ?"

"Certainly, if you wish it. Come, we must make haste."

Every one was of course assembled, and the eyes of every one were on the door as the two girls entered. Leo was very easily able to cover her confusion by running forward to meet her brother, whom she had not yet seen.

The Major, who was seated on the music-stool, let his eyes travel from his young *fiancée* to Miss Merrion's advancing figure. How that girl varied ! It was she who had sat, with a little cotton frock and straw hat, just within the church porch that afternoon, with a bunch of wild-flowers on her knee. Now he beheld a stately figure in primrose yellow silk, heavy and rich, with a train half across the floor. The small face wore a haughty look, the mien was all dignity. She softened into a smile as her glance met Greville's, and subsided into a chair beside him.

"Come Hope, come Hope, my dear," cried Mollie, "Dinner waits ! Come, Murie, come everybody ! The gentlemen are such a drug in the market that the ladies must go in together."

Leo scarcely spoke all dinner-time. She found herself between Mollie and Mr. Greville, and the latter thought her the most difficult girl to talk with that he had ever met. Hope, just opposite him, was brilliance itself. She seemed to have the art of giving a subtle expression and point to the most trivial thing she uttered. Greville was a good talker when he chose—had been to many places, and talked with men of various nations. Hope and he so succeeded in gaining the interest of the table as to take off all

attention from the guilty couple, whose painful self-consciousness gradually subsided.

The gentlemen did not remain in the dining-room after the ladies had quitted it, but took their cigars out into the warm gloom of the garden.

Muriel ordered the coffee to be carried out and placed on a basket-table under the tulip-tree on the gravel. A hanging-lamp was fastened to a bough by Tom, and so still was the night, that it burned steadily as in a room. The three girls wrapped themselves up in effective cloaks, and coffee out of doors was voted a complete success.

"How few nights an English summer grants us in which to play such tricks?" said Greville.

"The result is," said Hope, "to make the few times in our lives when we *can* do it, stand out clear and sharp in the memory."

Evelyn was sitting next her, and he stirred uneasily.

"I wonder if to-night will be memorable for anything in particular," said Tom, meditatively. "Suppose, for example, the house was to be burnt down——"

"Tom!"

"—Ever afterwards, when one of us said to another, 'Do you remember that still night on which we had coffee under the trees at Leaming?' the memory of the flames would rush to our minds, and a strange hush would fall on that merry throng."

"It would be a strange hush indeed, if it fell on any assembly where you were present, Thomas," said Mollie, genially.

"Ah, you jest! But you just give me a chance to save your family plate, and see if you are not my debtor for life?"

"The family plate might go, Tom, if you saved the girls."

"Plenty of you to save the girls among you," said Tom, scornfully. "You would all be rushing after the girls, and meanwhile I should secure the plate—"

baskets. But there! it won't happen. No fellow gets a chance of being a hero nowadays."

"No, we are in a prosaic age," said Greville, lightly. "I think we men sometimes seriously regret it; we should like a few more chances to win our spurs—to be able to give a proof to our lady-love that our strong right arm was really a protection from danger. There are very few men I fancy, nowadays, who have ever had the chance to strike a blow to protect their lady, and on the whole I think it is a pity."

"Should you rank physical courage so high?" asked Muriel. "I have an idea that it would not take much of a hero to knock down anybody who interfered with his property."

"It's the fashion to decry muscle, I know, Miss Saxon; but I believe a good deal of dross would be cleared away, and a good deal of fine gold discovered, if it were possible to prove who could fight like a man for the protection of the weak."

"A good many of these drawing-room chaps with the gift of the gab would go to the wall, I daresay," remarked Tom.

"I do believe the utter cessation of all chance to prove oneself the better man is largely responsible for the decay of chivalry in our age," said Richard Forde.

"The duel killed it," replied Greville, thoughtfully. "So utterly despicable a form of settlement was of course bound to come to an end."

"You recommend fists, then?" said Tom, clenching a formidable one.

"No, he would like to leap into the lion's den after his lady's glove," mischievously suggested Hope.

"I should think he would do as the knight in the poem did, then, and fling the glove in her face," said Tom, in a pugnacious way. "Oh, you needn't fly out, duckie; I know your beloved Browning tries to make out that the knight was wrong, and the lady was right; but, through the slight drawback of being

unintelligible, he has failed to make most people see the point——”

“He has done nothing of the kind, Tom!” cried Hope, as ready for battle as Tom himself could desire. “Has anybody else, here present, read Browning’s poem of the glove?”

Muriel had; and, after an instant’s pause, Major Westmorland also admitted that he knew it.

“I should like to hear what he says about it,” said Greville. “Myself, I have always considered there was one flaw in the story. Instead of throwing the glove in her face, I should have restored it, with the most profound and elegant bow; and never spoken to her again.”

“And what had she done?” cried Hope; “only the one thing that no woman may do in this world—taken a man at his word! She threw the glove as a test! For weeks the courtier had been sighing at her feet, imploring her to set him some task—something hard, dangerous, difficult beyond belief. What was there he would not do for her sake? Poor girl! She believed him.”

“Is that Browning’s idea?” said Greville, thoughtfully.

“Bless you, no! His is about a theorbo,” said Tom.

“Tom, how can you be so silly?”

“What is a theorbo?” asked Tom, blandly, of the company.

“A musical instrument of some kind,” said the Major’s deep, unwilling voice.

“I always thought it was Browningsque for glove; somebody dropped it, I know,” said Tom, with an injured voice.

“I suppose,” said Greville, following his own train of thought, “that Browning wanted to show the great importance of motive; this lady had done what, in the eyes of the world, was a most cold-blooded unnatural thing; but, when you learn her motive, the whole aspect of the case is altered: the heroic knight

becomes a braggart, who promised more than he ever meant to perform, and the lady takes the place of the injured person."

For her life, Hope could not have helped looking at Major Westmorland. He happened to be seated next her, and, though his eyes were in deep shadow, she felt that they rested upon her.

He made a movement she had never seen him make before : a slight, scarcely noticeable action : he passed his hand over his forehead, as if wearily, or in perplexity. The powerful hand fell again upon his knee—listlessly.

"I have always felt what you say about motive, very strongly," said Mollie, in his gentle way. "One ought to be so very shy of pronouncing on other people's actions until we know all the circumstances."

"The world would be a happier place if that rule were followed," said Hope, very gravely.

"This is getting very solemn," said Tom, frisking up. "Quite like a sermon—'Finally, dear brethren, let us go down to the Pleasaunce, and see if we can hear the Rushing Ghyl.'"

"A good thought, Tom! We ought to hear it splendidly to-night," said Mollie, "what wind there is, sets just in the right direction."

"What is the Rushing Ghyl?" asked Leo, contriving to speak at last.

"Ah! little girl! Are you there?" said her brother, kindly. "Come to me! I haven't heard the sound of your voice all the evening."

"Rushing Ghyl is the great fall at the top of Limmerdale," explained Tom. "It is some miles off from here, but it was I who first discovered that you can hear it in the Pleasaunce when the wind is due west."

"Some peculiarity in the nature of an echo, I expect," said Mollie. "For you can only hear it in that one place."

"Come along," cried Tom, flashing his lantern on them all.

Dick carried his little sister along with him ; Gilbert Greville found himself beside Muriel. By some inadvertency, Hope and the Major were left to bring up the rear together. It was the first time such a thing had happened since they came to Leaming. She could not exactly detach herself from him, for, without the light of his matches, she must have fallen over shrubs and flower-beds in the thick gloom. She picked her way in silence.

"You don't intend to speak to me!" he burst out presently, to her utter amazement.

"Nothing of the kind," she answered, at once determined to be natural in spite of her unaccountably disturbed feelings ; "but I was wondering if you would think me presumptuous if I wished you joy? I suppose congratulations are premature, until Mr. Forde has been consulted ; but Leo has told me of—of her happiness, and I should like to tell you that I think you are a fortunate man."

He was utterly silent. She gave him time ; they stumbled on in the dark for several long moments, but not a word was forthcoming.

"Really," said Hope at last, "I think such a polite speech deserves the courtesy of a reply. Come! Here and now, by virtue of your own great happiness, try to be a little forgiving ; can you be hard and bitter, on such a night as this, so full of stars?"

They had emerged from the gloom of the trees, and by the faint light she could just see his stern, frozen face. A great longing possessed her, at least to be at peace with him—not to bear always about with her the disapproval of his severe eyes. Very timidly she put out a little warm hand and wrist from the folds of her silken cloak.

"Won't you shake hands?" she said, beseechingly.

With any other man on earth she would never have doubted of success ; with him, she feared, she wavered. Perhaps that very wavering turned the scale against her. Slowly, deliberately, as if he

wished to emphasize the action, Evelyn put both his hands behind him.

She stood erect, motionless, flushing hotly in the starlight, unable to realise the pain she was enduring. The glove had been thrown in her face.

Degraded, ashamed in her own eyes, without a word passing between them, she turned away, moving slowly, with uncertain steps, wondering whether it could really have happened that she, Hope Merrion, with all her pride, all her resolution, should have made an advance towards reconciliation, and been met with insult, and rebuff.

It had all happened in a moment, she did not see what became of him—whether or not he followed her. It seemed as if that scorching blush were burned into her cheeks.

“The blow a glove gives is but weak;
Does the mark still disfigure my cheek?
But, when the heart suffers a blow,
Will the pain pass so soon, do you know?”

Westmorland stood, as she left him, watching the slight figure cross the turf, pause a moment by the old sun-dial as if for support, and then stray on again, towards the ivy archway. He saw Greville's trim form and white expanse of shirt-front appear in the archway, and heard his voice saying,

“Miss Merrion! I came to hasten you! Rushing Ghyl is distinctly audible—the effect is most weird! It seems as though a flood were roaring down upon us from the hills!”

The listener stood until these two had disappeared into the shadows, and then dropped his face into his hands.

“That's over! It's over now! Thank God!” were his strange words.

Then, collecting himself, he repaired to the Pleasance by another path; for was he not betrothed, and was not his betrothed awaiting him there?

“Take my arm, Miss Merrion,” said Greville, in

his pleasant way, "or you may stumble in this darkness."

Hope was really glad of the support, though she was able to summon a little laugh, and declare she felt like the ever-lovely Miss Beverley.

"Do you know, I am thinking over that story of the glove," said her cavalier, seriously, "and I am inclined to think that this Browning, whom you defend so ably, was right. Perhaps, however, I am always rather prone to believe in a woman, as against a man."

"Are you?" she said, turning to him with a warmth, an interest, she had never shown him before. "It is refreshing to meet a man who believes in woman. Oh, a woman will do *anything* for a man who believes in her! She will never disappoint him, she is bound, by all the strongest reasons that women know, to be in reality all that he thinks her . . . I beg your pardon for being so vehement, but you remember how eager I always am on any point where I feel strongly."

"I remember," he answered, gently, though again he wisely did not throw too much intention into his expressive voice.

They had reached the Pleasaunce, where the others stood, and, after a murmur of greeting, all subsided into a rapt stillness, harkening to the distant roar of the great waterfall, which rose and fell on the ear as though some huge door were opened and shut at irregular intervals. In the pause, Hope could collect her shattered nerves and summon her fortitude. She could breathe and think—could live over again in fancy that hateful moment of her humiliation, and dig her nails into her little hands, her teeth into her lip, as she recalled it.

It must be war to the knife now: no more pretence at a truce. And only this evening she had told Leo that she thought him good! He was more than hard, he was vindictive—vindictive and unmanly. What a

fate would be that of such a man's wife, if she happened to offend him !

But perhaps he, even he, had another side to his nature—"to show a woman, when he loved her." Did he love Leo?

Hope dared to raise her eyes and look across the grass to where they stood, side by side. They were not speaking. There was nothing in their action from which to learn anything. Only she felt as Muriel had felt, without being able to say why, that there was something incongruous in the idea of their marriage.

"We will ride to Rushing Ghyl to-morrow—you shall all see it," Mollie's cheerful voice was heard saying.

"Hark ! What was that ?" said Muriel, suddenly.

They listened. Somebody was shouting, far off, and indistinctly, calling some name repeatedly though all that could be heard sounded like "Or—or—or !"

"Is it Tom's fire ?" asked Richard Forde.

The voice approached. It will be remembered that the Pleasaunce, to which these eccentric people had all betaken themselves, was at the extreme end of the large, old-fashioned, rambling garden. At last a name could be distinguished.

"Mr. Lyster, sir ! Are you there ? Dr. Forde, sir ! Are you there ?"

"It's Burrows," said Mollie, in a mystified way, as Tom sent back an answering whoop. "What can possibly be the matter ?"

Burrows was the fat and elderly butler. In another minute or two, a light glimmered behind the peasticks, and he emerged into view, a lighted carriage-lamp in one hand, a silver salver in the other.

"Bless me !" said Mollie, peering through his spectacles.

Burrows was breathless and agitated.

"It's a telegraft, sir," he panted, "a telegraft for the doctor. I thought he must see it at once, while the messenger got a bit of supper."

Owing to the remote nature of the place—the portage was five shillings—telegrams were rare in the experience of this archaic retainer. There was a general laugh of relief, as Richard took up the orange envelope.

“One of my patients kicking over the traces, I expect,” said he. “Sorry, Leo.”

He opened it, held it near his eyes, but was obliged to call for Tom’s lantern to assist his sight. It was an odd scene, stamped in Hope’s memory always: the little group of expectant people, the tossing light, which

“Struck up into the trees, and laid
Upon their under leaves unwonted light,
And, when he held it low, how far it spread,
O’er velvet pansies, slumbering in their bed.”

“Why,” cried Dick, in a surprised voice, with a pleased laugh, “here’s an absurd thing! ’Twill shorten our visit here, though, Leo, I’m afraid! Westmorland, this will interest you. Only think! Disney has arrived! He is awaiting us at Minster-gate!”

CHAPTER XXI.

DON’T YOU LIKE HOPE?

There’s a secret in his breast
Which will never let him rest.

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

“I don’t think,” said Richard, in a bewildered way, “that I was ever so surprised in all my life, and I’m not easily surprised. Say it again, Westmorland, that I may be assured of the normal use of my faculties. I am under no hallucination! You really,

seriously, tell me that you want to marry my little Leo?"

"That's so," said the Major, poking baby ferns ruthlessly out of the clefts of the wall with his stick.

"Well!" said Richard again, removing his after-breakfast cigar from his mouth, and staring up into the blue sky above him, "I repeat, I am so amazed that I don't know what to say!"

"May I ask," said Evelyn, stiffly, "what is so very surprising? when I told you, a few weeks ago, that I was set against the idea of marrying, you told me that you considered me, for that very reason, a promising candidate for matrimony."

"True," said Forde, more gravely. "I said so, and I was right: it is not your wanting to marry that bowls me over so completely; it's your wanting to marry my sister!"

"Is that so very hard to understand?" asked Leo's grim suitor.

"It's a novelty to me, you see," said the doctor, with a sigh. "She is young. I hoped to have kept her with me for a year or two, at least. It will make such a difference; you don't know how she brightened my life!"

"She is very bright——"

"Then," Dick interrupted, "there is the other aspect of the case. I am not such a fool as to imagine that my sister is a match for you, Westmorland. Two thousand pounds when she comes of age is the extent of her dowry, and in point of position, why——"

"Nothing of that kind is of the least consequence," hurriedly said Evelyn. "It is a poor compliment to Miss Forde, but you know my father is so desirous of my marriage that he would welcome almost any wife I chose to present to him. He admires your sister immensely, and I fancy his only feeling will be intense surprise that she could care about such an uninteresting person as myself."

Dick looked narrowly at the speaker.

"You must remember," said he, "that, in my interview with your father, he showed none of this anxiety for your marriage."

"No," replied Evelyn, slowly, "because I think he saw, then, the way things were going. I was playing tennis with your sister that afternoon."

"Ah! so you were! . . . and I suppose the mischief was irrevocably done the night of the *tableaux vivants*?"

Evelyn thought of his encounter with his father that night, and could answer truly.

"Yes, I made up my mind then. I only came here, to Leaming, because she was invited."

"Aha!" said Dick, thinking how deep these quiet fellows were. "Well, I know she considers you the greatest hero living, an embodiment of all the champions of romance; but I don't expect she imagined for a moment that her Jove would descend from the clouds and woo her!"

Remorseful memories of his blundering courtship brought a most unwonted red to the Major's brow.

"She—she was very much upset," he said ruefully. "I was too sudden, I think. I don't know anything about women, you see."

"Poor little Leo!" said Richard, softly.

"I'll do anything—everything in my power to make her happy," faltered Evelyn, "we live simply, you know, but both of us would like a little more life about the house. She can have anything she wants, in reason, and my father will dote upon her."

"You would think of living at Feverell, then, with Mr. Westmorland?"

"Why—yes. I couldn't leave him, I'm afraid," said Evelyn, struck as with a new idea. "Do you think Miss Forde will dislike it? The house is large enough for us all three, I think."

"Oh, you must consult her about that. I dare say you will have no difficulty: she is too young to have very deep-rooted proclivities. My little Leo! Dear

me, how odd ! Never once did it cross my mind ; and yet, now that it is done, I will tell you frankly that I would rather see her married to you than to any other man I know. I believe in you."

Evelyn sighed. How hard it was, this approach to marriage which he had dutifully set himself to climb. How slowly the hours had passed since yesterday evening, when he obtained Leo's promise. Had he ever passed such a long night before—each hour lengthened into two, and marked mournfully by the old church clock ?

He consoled himself by the sentence he had written of old in his first Latin exercise-book, " All beginning is difficult." He had manfully made his beginning, torn away and flung out of his heart anything that offended. No wonder that, so soon after amputation, he should feel lacerated and weak. He meant to love Leo dearly ; to devote his life to her as soon as this brief madness was over. It would very soon be over now. Richard had telegraphed Disney to make himself at home until to-morrow, and then Major Westmorland and the Fordes would return to Norchester, and the engagement be duly announced.

That would be the hour of Evelyn's reward. He could look his friend in the eyes without shame, having wrestled with and cast out temptation. And his father's joy ! He could fancy his approving glance, his warm grasp of the hand, the health and elasticity which would return to him now that the overshadowing dread of the prophecy was gone.

" I thought something was up with the little woman last night," said Dick, with a meditative smile, as they reached the end of the shrubbery and turned. " She was so subdued ; I dare say, if we had been alone, it would all have come out."

" Here she comes," said the Major, suddenly, as a vision of a summer-dress appeared at the end of the green nut-tree avenue. " She said she should join us when I had prepared you."

Leo came towards them, slowly and shyly, her face

sober with the awe of her new condition, her eyes fixed wistfully on Richard.

"Well," he said as soon as she was within earshot, "this is a nice business to let me in for the minute after breakfast."

"Oh, Dick?" she cried, beseechingly; and running to him, hugged him heartily, hiding her glowing face in his shoulder. "It seems so disgusting of me to think of preferring anybody to you, dear!"

"That's nature, Leo," said her brother, gravely. "Of course I don't understand it; I don't understand how any woman could prefer any man in the world to me. I have to accept it as an unaccountable fact."

"Oh, Dick, don't make fun!"

"I am not often accused of such a thing, but you and I seem to have changed characters to-day. Have you not a smile for your lover here?"

She turned her face to Evelyn then, and gave him a look which he must have been flint indeed not to respond to—a look so maidenly, and yet so ardent, would have flattered any man.

His unwonted smile lighted up his face and he stretched out his arms to her.

"Leo! I think Richard will let me have you," he said, unsteadily.

"Let her speak!" said Richard, holding her back.

"Look well at him, Leo! Do you really care about him—so many years older and wiser than yourself?"

"Oh, Dick! Dick! You know!"

"You are sure you know your own mind, my child?"

"Oh, quite sure!"

"Then I suppose it must be! I must give you up. But you must allow me time, Leo—time to grow used to the idea of losing you. There! I must take a stroll, and think it over. I daresay you two will excuse me. Little scamp!" he concluded, fondly.

"Fancy your being Mrs. Westmorland, of Feverell Chase."

He released her with a very tender kiss : and then Evelyn came forward.

"Come down and sit by the beck, and we will talk," he said, drawing her willing hand through his arm.

They wandered away together, down the steep woody glade, to the side of the noisy beck where, two or three days ago, they had fished. Very silently, now, they sat down on a mossy stone : and Evelyn wondered what he should say. His betrothed saved him the trouble of beginning.

"I want to tell you something," she said, shyly.

"Yes, Leo? Tell me—anything."

"You will not be angry?"

"I can safely promise that."

"Well, it is this : I felt so—yesterday evening—so strange, you know, that I felt, whatever happened, I *must* tell some one. So I told Hope—you are not angry?"

"No—certainly not."

"You looked angry."

"It is my forbidding expression ; you must teach me to look pleasant, won't you? I am a dull fellow, and you are like one of those bright, flashing humming birds that dart about in the sunlight. Are you not afraid of growing moped and grave like me?"

"No," she said, lightly brushing the shoulder of his rough coat with her velvety cheek, "I love you so."

"God bless you !" he cried, in a sudden burst of thankfulness. "It is new to me to be loved ;" and he kissed her with a warmth which astonished him.

The kiss was a very great and agitating matter to Leo. He had to soothe her as best he could. He felt constrained to beg her pardon so many times that at last she was obliged to laugh, and that set them on an easier footing. He began to talk to her of many things—his father's welcome for her, and the old Chase at Feverell which would be her home, and the wonderful old sapphire ring which had belonged

to the Westmorlands for many generations, and which he meant should be her betrothal-ring. Talk like this was easy, and at the end of an hour he felt that he had been neither bored nor miserable, and a hope began to dawn that one day, in the future, he should forget his present pain, looking upon it as a sick delusion, and give thanks for the resolution that enabled him to live through that scene last night in the starlit garden. To-morrow would be the end. He should leave Leaming and Hope Merrion behind, and begin his new life in earnest.

"And I may give parties at Feverell, and invite my friends to stay with me!" cried Leo, joyfully. "It will be like a fairy-tale. I know who will be the first guest I invite—Hope! I am so fond of her."

There was no need for the Major to tell her that he did not wish this particular guest invited; he knew too well that Hope Merrion would never cross his threshold.

"She thinks you very good," said Leo presently.

"What?" was his inelegant and startled ejaculation.

"Hope thinks you very good. I asked her yesterday evening."

"She said so?"

"Yes. Poor Hope! she has been so unhappy. She was engaged to be married, and she found out that the man she was engaged to was not good; she was disappointed in him, and she had to break it off. She told me it was the most miserable time of her life."

"Did she mention in what way she was disappointed?" asked Evelyn, drilling holes in the moss with his stick.

"She didn't exactly say, as far as I remember," said Leo, thoughtfully. "If I had asked more, I think she would have told me more; but I was so full of my own concerns. I have an idea—that is, I gathered, from what she said, that he told her a falsehood."

"Oh!" said Evelyn, helplessly.

The sound of the great outdoor bell now pealed through the house.

"Oh!" cried Leo, starting up, "that is for early lunch. You know we are all to ride to Rushing Ghyl directly afterwards! I must make haste; I ought to put on my habit before lunch."

He helped her up the mossy bank, and walked at her side with his thoughts once more rebelliously full of the forbidden topic. It seemed as if Leo, too, were still dwelling on her friend's unlucky love-affair, for she presently said,

"I am trying to recall something Hope said yesterday before we met you. Was it really only yesterday? It seems to me years ago. Everything has happened since . . ." She broke off into musing.

"Well?" said Evelyn, hating himself for his inability to repress the question.

"She said," said Leo, "that she was the cause—the innocent cause—of a great wrong being done. We were leaning against that gate on the church hill, and she cried as she told me about it. She said the wrong could never be put right now, and that there was something, here in Leaming, that reminded her of it. She is not happy, I am sure; I believe she would like to die."

"That seems unnatural."

"Don't you like Hope?" said Leo, innocently. "You always seem vexed if I talk about her."

"I know very little of her; but I must say she does not convey to me the impression of being unhappy, or of wishing to die," he said, bitterly.

They were nearing the hall-door as he spoke, and the words were barely out of his mouth, when, as if to corroborate them, a peal of laughter—Hope's own clear laughter—burst upon their ears. They hurried in.

The hall was filled with a crowded audience—most of the servants, Mollie, Muriel, Richard Forde, and Greville. In the centre were ranged twelve

chairs, in a circle, eight or nine feet across. In each chair sat a dog, in sizes varying from Mollie's yard-mastiff to Muriel's toy terrier. The faces of the twelve were a study, all being fixed with rapture on Hope, who, attended by the ever faithful Tom, stood in the centre of the circle with a plate of cake. She dexterously threw a morsel to each dog in rapid succession, and, what with the skill and precision of her aim and the accomplishment of the dogs, she threw two rounds without any missing. It was a ludicrous sight. Mollie laughed till he was forced to take off his spectacles, and wipe his eyes. The frantic excitement of the dancing, yapping terriers, the trembling tearfulness of the spaniels, and the utter unconcern of Tom's fine St. Bernard, whose huge jaws opened and shut, as his master observed, "like a portcullis," were irresistible.

The two fresh arrivals on the scene seemed to animate Hope anew. She had never looked more brilliant, more daring, more dangerous. Greville's eyes were fixed upon her; he looked like a man under a spell.

"There, Larrie! The last bit is for you, because you are old and suffering," she said, tossing a morsel to the Major's old Skye, which was the only dog he brought with him to Hesselburgh. "There! the performance is over. Down, dogs! Now, Brown,"—to the groom "you may take Don back to the yard. He has been as good as gold; I told you he would."

"Yes, miss," grinned Brown, "but you've got such a way with the dawgs!"

"And now, madcap, come to lunch, or you will have time for none," said Mollie, patting her shoulder.

"I say, we haven't sent the hat round yet!" cried Tom.

"Ladies and gentlemen, knowing your needy circumstances, we will accept a round of applause instead," said Hope, modestly.

It was given with hearty goodwill, nearly sending the terriers into hysterics. Tom and she bowed their acknowledgments, and marched into the dining-room in state, arm-in-arm.

"Wasn't it a beautiful performance?" asked Tom, breathlessly, of Greville, to whom he had taken a great fancy.

"Splendid. Was it quite impromptu?"

"Oh, quite! It came into our heads through seeing three of them sitting in a row on hall chairs, and then we hunted up all the others."

Greville put up his double eyeglass, the better to study this new phase in Miss Merrion's character. What a head of his establishment she would make! What a hostess! All that glee—those spirits—that ease, combined with such undoubted breeding. He had heard several London men—visitors at Fred Merrion's—say that "Miss Merrion, the heiress, was so confoundedly standoffish."

Ah, if they could see her among those she loved!

CHAPTER XXII.

I KNOW THEY HAVE A CURSE.

And they felt the breath of the downs, fresh-blown
Over leagues of clover, and cold grey stone.

BRET HARTE.

"MAKE the most of to-day, my children, for the weather is going to change," said Tom, as he altered the length of his stirrups, standing on the hall doorstep.

"Nonsense, Tom! I never saw it look more settled in my life," said Muriel, who was already mounted on her own beautiful little mare.

"All right! You know better than old Benjamin,

I suppose. He says the glass has been creeping slowly down for three days, and that means a week of pouring rain with the wind in this quarter; so gather your roses while ye may, knights and ladies all."

"I shall not mind going away so much, if it turns wet," whispered Leo, softly, to the Major, who had just put her into the saddle, and was now loosening a strap for her.

Nothing had as yet been said of the engagement. Mr. Westmorland must be consulted before it could be announced. Hope had not even spoken of it to Muriel. She felt as if the mere mention of Evelyn Westmorland's name would choke her.

All through the sleepless hours of the summer night she had lain, watching the stars—seeing the first glow of dawn in the wan east, and hearing the earliest chirp of the waking birds in the ivy outside her window.

She was a prey to a pain which she could not understand. A depression, totally unlike anything she had ever felt before, weighed her down. She knew its ostensible cause; the affront offered her by an ignorant, angry, prejudiced young man in the garden the night before. But why should this have taken such terrible hold upon her? When had she ever cared for people's misjudgment of her before? Last winter, in Columbo, every one had agreed to believe that Miss Merrion had treated that nice young Disney abominably; and opinions had been pretty freely expressed. What had she heeded? All disapproving looks, innuendoes, hints of unconscionable flirtation, and attitudes of pained surprise had been as nothing to her. Why was this latest champion of her discarded lover so much more formidable? Why was his disapprobation to crush her?

The only reasons she could think of were three in number. In the first place, she had been obliged to be in the same house with him, and consequently had, as it were, lived in an atmosphere of his con-

tempt; secondly, he would prejudice Leo against her—Leo, for whom she had conceived so genuine a liking; thirdly, she had so far forgotten herself as to ask him to be friends with her, and he had declined. She supposed that it must be an admixture of these feelings which weighed so heavily upon her soul, yet all of them combined seemed yet inadequate as a reason for the abyss of dreariness into which she had suddenly sunk. Her own pallor and heavy-lidded appearance, when she looked in her glass on rising, had startled her. Desperate measures must be taken. Whatever happened, she must not seem to care. Nobody must remark that she looked pale, or out of spirits.

So far, she had been completely successful. Mollie thought he had never seen her so gay, so irresistibly, infectiously merry, and, after all, it was only for to-day—only a few hours more, then her enemy would be gone, and she should never, never see him again. She could shake off the memory of his dislike and his rudeness, and life would be again as it had been for her on that dewy morning when Tom and she went mushrooming in the park.

So she boldly told herself, but in vain. Vaguely she felt that she could never reconstruct the Hope who drove that brilliant morning in the dog-cart to Norchester station, to meet the strange, morose, unbending man, who by utterly declining to succumb to her influence, by mutely refusing even to be at peace with her, had succeeded in giving her so deep an impression of her own insufficiency.

“For,” she had argued to herself in the nocturnal silence, “though I was not guilty in the way he thinks, yet can I honestly say that I was not to blame in the Disney affair? What am I? What have I been all my life but a butterfly, living in the sunshine of admiration—happy, because I was petted and made much of? Why did I say ‘yes’ to Edgar Disney? Because he was handsome and winning, and it was very pleasant to be loved as he seemed to

love me! Did it go any deeper? Did I ask myself what I was prepared to suffer, to give up for him, if called upon? I never once thought of the word 'self-sacrifice,' in connection with love. I never thought of self-sacrifice at all, until I met him—this man who is my enemy. When first I saw him, simply and naturally devoting his life and energies to the care of a fretful, conceited old man, who undervalued him, made use of him, sneered at him; and when I saw that all the time he never even knew that there was anything which anybody could call fine in his conduct, that he simply did it because it did not occur to him to do anything else—that such service, which expected no reward, was absolutely natural to him: then I knew the meaning of the love which is self-sacrifice. I knew what that man would be when he loved a woman! Oh, that is the sting of it! That is the sting of it! In this one point on which we are at feud, I am right, and he is wrong; but in ourselves, it is the other way. He is noble; I am paltry. He quietly and unconsciously lays down his own will to do his father's; I live to amuse myself! No wonder he despises me! I despise myself!"

Such thoughts would come; they were not to be dismissed; again her mind was full of them as her maid arranged her habit and fastened her hat securely.

Was there nothing she could do to make her respect herself? No duty in the world for her to perform? Who was there of her kith and kin who needed her devotion? The only ones she loved were Fred's children, and they had all they wanted, including even a most exceptionally good governess. Hope had a great respect for Mabel Thorpe, and a great tenderness for her story. She was the eldest of a clergyman's swarming family, a poor vicar whose struggles to educate his children and serve his parish had broken down his health and spirits. Mabel was engaged to his curate, Arthur Strange—as hopeless an engagement as could well be imagined; yet the

courage of these two never failed. Secure of one another's love, no reverse of fortune seemed to have power over them; and this was true love, as Hope felt.

"You look pale, Miss Merrion," observed Bowen.

"You don't say so! Do I?" cried Hope, snatching up a hand-glass. "I wish I had some rouge! I would put it on."

"Your ride will freshen you up, miss. You was all up too late last night, that's what it is. I think, miss, you are quite ready, and I fancy you are keeping the party waiting; so you had better go."

"Now for it again," was Hope's inward adjuration to herself. "Into the arena once more; it will soon be over, remember."

She had not spoken to Evelyn that day, and only once had encountered his eyes as he entered the hall where, as Tom said, they were playing the fool with the dogs. He had come in with Leo, and stood on one side, that expression of unbending, rigid scorn on his face. How well she knew it! How she felt what it expressed! She had answered it with her most flippant smile, but her heart had ached ever since.

Down the staircase she ran, past the oil-painting of Mollie's dead young wife, which hung over the hearth in the hall. That picture had been a very severe disappointment to Hope at first, it represented such a plump, rosy, cheerful young person, with no trace in her round blue eyes of

"That look they say they have
In their faces, who die young."

Moreover, Mrs. Lyster had been married and painted in those terrible days of the "chignon," and was represented decked out in all the fashion of her time, in chalky white muslin and pink ribbons, a long gold watch-chain and an ivory cross on a piece of black velvet tied tight round her neck. It was, how-

ever, a face which grew upon you, it was so fresh and honest and happy ; and to-day Hope envied it as she passed. To be so truly loved, so sincerely and permanently mourned, is not the portion of many women.

Outside, every one was mounted, except Mr. Greville, and Tom greeted her with a shout of

“Hurry up, duckie !”

“Am I keeping you all waiting?” said she. “I am very sorry.”

“Let me put you up, Miss Merrion?” pleaded Greville.

“Am I to ride Peony?” continued she, as she stood just inside the doorway, surveying the party.

“Oh, yes, I see I am. I hope she is not too fresh, Brown?”

“Well, yes, miss, perhaps she is a bit fresh,” confessed the groom, who held Peony’s head, “but she won’t give you no trouble, miss, no more than the dawgs did ;” and Brown grinned, a stable auxiliary in the background grinning likewise, having evidently heard of and appreciated Miss Merrion’s new way of amusing the company.

Hope felt a trifle indignant with herself for her undignified escapade, and really a little nervous about her ride. Fearless as she was in all other ways, she was strangely enough rather a timid horsewoman, having had a bad fall as a child.

“Did you not exercise her yesterday, as I asked you, Brown?” she said, reproachfully.

“Well, I couldn’t manage it exactly yesterday, miss, with the shooting and the station and the luggage ; but bless you, miss, she’s all right, as quiet as a lamb ; and a canter on the moor’ll soon take the sperrit out of her.”

“What is it, Hope?” cried Muriel, whose horse was moving slowly down the drive.

“I’m afraid Peony will run away with me again, as she did the other day.”

“Oh, nonsense,” cried Tom ; “up with you ! She

only bolted about fifty yards, and that was because she saw a traction engine."

"Well, if there are many traction engines about to-day, I hope some kind person will come to her head," said Hope, resignedly, "for I could not have stopped her last week if a precipice had been in front of us."

"Why, you did stop her—pulled her up splendidly!"

"Only because a steep, long hill befriended me. But I will mount, and say no more about it. I am very foolish and cowardly, I know."

"Is there not another horse you could have?" asked Greville, in a low voice, as she sprang lightly to her seat.

She shook her head.

"Peony is the only one who will carry a habit, except Muriel's own mare; and Miss Forde must have the old pony, because she is quite a beginner; and really this one goes beautifully—I liked her very much till she frightened me by bolting: it is foolish to be nervous, but I don't seem able to help it."

"She will not bolt to-day, with so many of us in the party," said Greville, reassuringly. "What a cavalcade! Eight of us. Does Lyster mount us all?"

"The Saxons brought their own horses, and Major Westmorland his hunter: the others are all from the Leaming stables."

"Lyster seems quite to have adopted the two young Saxons."

"Oh, yes; Tom is his heir," said Hope, as they moved slowly onward a little to the rear of the rest of the party. "He is to have everything, except a sum—ten thousand pounds, I believe it is—which goes to Muriel. It is very curious—how unequally things are divided in this world!"

"Are you thinking of any particular instance?" he said, as she broke off.

"Yes, I am thinking that Muriel and Tom will be as rich as need be, without this fortune of Mollie's; and I know a girl to whom half that ten thousand

pounds would mean everything—freedom to marry the man she loved.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes, she is such a brave girl—engaged to a curate in a large, desolate country parish, with no chance of preferment. I wish I could help them.”

Greville thought her generous sympathy exceedingly becoming.

“Do you know nobody with any church patronage?” he asked.

“Church patronage?” said she, puzzled.

“I suppose you know that some families have livings in their gift?”

“Why, yes; I never thought of that,” she said, as if struck.

“You know so many people, I think you must know somebody who could help you in that way,” he said. “I, unfortunately, have no presentation; but Major Westmorland, now—there are two or more livings in the Westmorland gift, I know for a fact. Why don’t you ask him?”

A curious tightening came over the pretty lips.

“Major Westmorland is a very slight acquaintance,” said she, curtly.

Greville looked at her with a momentary surprise.

“A thoroughly good fellow, by all accounts,” he said, tentatively; “at least, he was very popular in the army.”

“He and I don’t get on very well together, somehow,” replied Hope.

“Has he not a very eccentric father?”

“His father,” she answered, answered, incisively, “belongs to a school of good manners long since obsolete; he has not succeeded in transmitting any of them to his son.”

“Are his manners not good? That is supposed to be a prevalent fault, nowadays,” said Greville, musingly. “I thought myself yesterday that he seemed rather wool-gathering, but I imagined the cause was to be sought there,” nodding towards Leo’s slim

figure, "and that it was a temporary phase. I suppose," he added, smiling a little, "that the Curse will not come off, after all."

"The Curse?" said Hope, much mystified.

"Yes, the doom of the Westmorlands; surely you have heard of it?"

"Never, indeed!"

"Well, such modesty is refreshing, nowadays," cried Greville, "it is what I could not hope to imitate. If I had a right-down genuine Curse, centuries old, in my family archives, I should send it to all the society papers, and I should be the hero of the hour! Do the Westmorlands really never talk of theirs?"

"I never heard a word of it; are you not joking?"

"No, on my honour. I know they have a Curse. This Major Westmorland's mother was Lady Gertrude Coniston, you know—Lord Ulleswater's daughter."

"I know that his second name is Coniston."

"Very likely. My people are related to the Conistons, and that is how I heard of the matter."

"But what is the Curse? Do tell me."

"I'm afraid I never heard the details; but it is something to do with the estates being held by a younger son, and, as the Major's father was a younger son, I believe he is much afraid that the prophecy will be fulfilled in his day."

"The Major is afraid?"

"No, his father. I have been told that he is quite cracked on the subject, but rumour doubtless exaggerates these things."

"Certainly I never heard of it," replied Hope, wonderingly, "though everybody seems to admit that old Mr. Westmorland is very tiresome."

As she spoke, the horses reached the end of the steep, wooded lane, up which they had been climbing; and, with a burst, the whole of the wide moorland lay before them, with its heaving ridges, its rounded turf heights crowded with rocky tors, and its white, lonely ribbon-like roads, stretching away apparently into illimitable distance.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE LAST RIDE TOGETHER.

"I and my mistress, side by side,
Shall be together, breathe, and ride,
So, one day more am I defied.
Who knows but the world may end to-night?"

ROBERT BROWNING.

SIMULTANEOUSLY they all reined in their horses for a few minutes, to enjoy that panorama. The sun brooded over it, hot and sleepy, and the few clouds in the southwest were too distant and too motionless to make them apprehensive. To Hope there was always a strange, unwilling fascination in the silence and solitude of the moor; a desire to wander off there by herself, which was horrible, and yet could not be resisted. She thought of the scapegoat, and the land not inhabited, as her eye roamed over the ridges.

"You cannot see very far, the ground is too irregular," said Greville.

"Oh, no, you never get an extensive view," answered Mollie, "the hills seem to rise behind you as you advance. Before we have got very far into the moor, you will not be able to see a scrap of cultivated ground."

"But you said there were such lovely ferns and trees at Rushing Ghyl," said Leo, who was beginning to find her tongue again. "This place looks too bare and desolate for ferns and trees!"

"We must ride some miles before we come to them," said Mollie, "the river-valley is hidden away so cunningly; but I can show you where it lies—over yonder, behind the hill with a pointed rock at

the top. That is Carra Tor, and there is a cromlech on the further side of it."

"A cromlech?" said Leo.

"Yes, an altar-stone, where the Druids offered sacrifice; have you never seen one?"

"Never."

"There is a curious tradition about this one," he said, smiling, "which Tom, as a little boy, was very fond of hearing."

"About the human victim?" cried Tom. "Yes, Mollie used to be a very good hand at describing the old altar-stone streaming with blood, and the Druids with their coats off warming up well to their work, when, just at the moment that the knife was lifted to knock the young Christian martyr on the head—what happened, Mollie?"

"Oh, you may as well finish, as you have begun so successfully."

"Well," said Tom, "a jet of water spouted up from the stone, which was taken to be a sign that the gods wanted to put a stop to the execution; and there is the round hole still, where the fountain came out."

"My father would tell you," said Evelyn, smiling, "that the hole was made intentionally in the stone by the Druids, to carry off the blood; there is such a hole in most cromlechs."

"A nasty, spiteful piece of nineteenth century rationalism," said Tom, indignantly. "I shall relate no more ecclesiastical legends."

"For the best of reasons—you don't know any," said Muriel, placidly. "Come, Mollie, we will give them a lead."

Off scoured the pretty mare and after her all the others, the dull thunder of their hoofs on the short warm turf awaking a strange excitement in all the young blood. Peony, who had been very calm and even depressed as they toiled up the stony lane, no sooner felt the elasticity of the ground beneath her, then she begun to bound and dance, and Greville

cast a watchful eye on her rider. It was easy to see that Hope was nervous, but she smiled bravely at him, her slim little figure very erect, her eyes very bright.

"I don't mind her jumping about, if only she does not bolt," she said. "I had a bad fall once, and now, however much I try to help it, directly I feel unable to pull my horse up, I always live over again that minute of being shot over its head into the road; and it unnerves me."

The next ridge—a pretty steep one—seemed to calm the horse's spirits to a more decorous playfulness, and soon Hope could begin to chat again to her cavalier.

He had a great deal to say of travels, books, and pictures; he could discuss the last play, contrast the merits of rival composers, estimate the value of this year's and last year's Academy Exhibitions, enter into the political situation, and name the reigning family on every throne in Europe. Not only was he well-bred, well-read, and sensible, but he knew how to express himself with point and accuracy, and yet give no disagreeable impression of having got up his subject, nor of quoting his opinions from reviews, nor of talking for talking's sake. He was a man who would always be a social success. Every little bit of knowledge he possessed was immediately ready to hand, and useful; and he had also the tact which enabled him almost at once to know on what topic his companion for the time being would like to talk.

Hope thought what a pleasant companion he was, and mentally compared him with the taciturn, uncompromising Major who never by any chance would open his lips to an audience of more than one if he could help it.

Greville was very anxious to-day to turn this general talk into more personal channels; but with habitual tact, he saw that this was not quite possible. There was no shade of consciousness in Miss Merrion's manner—nothing to give him a loop-hole, an excuse

for introducing himself or his hopes. She rode at his side indeed, she seemed desirous of doing so, and in no way anxious of changing her cavalier. But she was out of spirits, he thought, and wanted nothing less than to have her feelings stirred. The unselfishness which a sincere love begets made him feel all this, and restrict his talk to what might amuse or soothe her: and he succeeded very well. Even with Leo and Evelyn Westmorland riding always before—with their backs to study their movements to watch—to see without looking every time that his hand was outstretched to correct her holding of the reins, his head turned to speak to her or to point out something ahead—even with all this to be borne, Hope's mood was softened and alleviated by his attentive kindness.

But Tom was not going to stand this long; he felt himself supplanted, and, like all boys of his age, he could be very annoying if he chose. To separate Hope and Greville was his object, and, for a time, he did not see how to accomplish it, riding with them on Hope's other side was no use, for he was too emphatically number three. Such also was the case if he tried to attach himself to Leo and the Major, or to his sister and Dr. Forde. It was exceedingly mortifying; Mollie was the only person who seemed to have leisure to take any notice of him. It made him very wroth.

"He would never have come to Leaming," he told himself, angrily, "if he had known all this spooning was going to be the result. He had thought that Hope and Muriel were sensible, and despised such nonsense;" and he cast various withering glances at his fickle fair one, which she was too heavy-hearted to notice.

And now, at last, they reached the river valley. Quite unexpectedly they turned a corner, and caught a view of a deep gorge, of cool shady woods and granite heights, purple with their glory of heather. Now for the first time they heard the roar of the great

falls, hidden as yet from view by many windings of the valley.

"We generally dismount here," said Mollie, wheeling round, "and fasten up the horses; the way down to the falls is so steep and full of loose stones."

It was a work of some little time to make fast all the steeds, but it was at last accomplished, and then they started on their downward path. Firstly, through a larch-wood, the sun glinting down in pale rays among the stems; for a mist seemed to be eclipsing its brightness, and the air was heavy and oppressive. Next, across an old stone bridge, built by the monks of a by-gone day, under which the shallow torrent rushed musically, broken by huge mossy boulders tufted with delicate fern. Now height after height of heather and granite rose around them, and they wound their way in and out among the loose rocks on the shores of the stream. Presently a point was reached too steep for the ladies to jump down without assistance.

Evelyn, who was in front, lifted down Leo, and then Miss Saxon. Close behind her came Hope, who did not see who waited below to perform the kindly office until she stood in the narrow gap, with her hands outstretched. It was her first chance that day to fling back the glove in his face, and she took it. With great calmness, she turned her back upon him, and said, just loud enough for him to hear.

"Tom, are you there? I want you to jump me down."

Tom bustled forward delightedly, jumped down himself, so suddenly as almost to upset Major Westmorland, and then turned to Hope.

"Now, then, duckie!" he cried, delightedly.

Down floated Hope, as lightly as a leaf, her slender body scarcely seeming to rest any of its weight upon him. Then, gathering up her habit,

"Race me to that tree, Tom!" she gaily cried; and away they both darted, distancing all the rest of the party, and arriving first at the Rushing Ghyl.

All heartburnings, and jealousy, all hatred seemed thrown into the background by the majesty of the beautiful column of translucent water, green and gleaming with the light which transfused it at the top, sinking under their feet into an abyss of darkness, from which arose a mighty roaring and a cloud of white, dust-like spray.

Hope leaned silently against a projecting piece of granite, and gave herself up to contemplation. Here, night and day, unseen, unheard, far beyond reach of the cockney tourist, it "thundered on the everlasting hills," doing its portion of work for the world, unwearied, uncomplaining, grand in its solitude, purity, and awfulness. No one spoke, for no one's voice could be heard in the rushing of the falls. Unceasingly they flowed on—the generous tribute of life, fertility, and abundance sent by the hills to the valleys, their sisters. Into Hope's mind came familiar words, invested with a new meaning.

"They go up as high as the hills, and down to the valleys beneath; even unto the place which Thou hast appointed for them."

And surely, if every runnel which trickled in the moss had its appointed bourne, and its work which it was created to do, then there was work and a place in the world for Hope Merrion—there must be!

At last Muriel came up, and broke into her reverie by shouting in her ear.

"Mollie thinks we ought to be moving—the storm is coming up so fast."

She raised her eyes then to the sky, lurid and overcast.

"What a pity!" she sighed, as she turned reluctantly away.

Greville joined her as soon as they were far enough from the vociferous waterfall to make his voice audible.

"You appeared very grave just now as you stood looking at the Ghyl," said he.

"I was thinking seriously," she replied, frankly.

"I can be serious—even I—now and then, you know."

"Of course," he said, hastily, "else you were not the true woman I take you to be."

"There is something in those falls which impressed me," she said.

"Or was it partly something in your mind to which the grandeur of nature responded?" suggested he. "You know, sometimes, our impressions of things vary greatly, according to the frame of mind in which we approach them."

"I know," she answered.

Greville felt that he had made a beginning, however small. He had spoken to her of herself and her feelings, and she had not turned it off, nor answered lightly, nor seemed offended. He would have liked to say more, but the turn of the path showed them to be in sight of the horses, and he must perforce wait until they were mounted again. As they halted to watch the others come up, a low mutter of thunder reverberated among the hills, and Mollie, stepping out into the open, anxiously surveyed the threatening heavens.

"I am considering," he said, "whether it would be wiser to get into the shelter of the woods here until the storm is gone by; it seems to be coming up so exceedingly rapidly."

"There would be better shelter under the hanging Tor, wouldn't there?" suggested Tom. "We should have plenty of time to ride there, and we could protect the horses much better."

"A good thought, Tom; I fancy that is the best thing we can do. Mount is the order, then."

This little debate had been unheard by Greville, who was busy putting Hope on her horse, and she was already in the saddle. As soon as she was seated, he walked off to fetch his own horse, which was fastened at some little distance. The animal had somehow contrived to get the reins entangled round a broken branch of the tree to which it was tethered,

and it took Greville some few minutes to extricate it.

Major Westmorland had just liberated his fine hunter, when, in an instant, the whole sky was opened with a fearfully vivid flash of forked lightning, and, crashing immediately upon it, a roll of such thunder as is only to be heard among the hills.

Hope, totally unprepared, started violently ; Peony, mad with fear, reared—trembling and snorting. Her rider, barely seated, had not had time to take a firm grasp of the reins ; she dropped her whip, and, before she could recover herself, the irritable mare was off—off, almost as swiftly as the sudden flash itself—disappearing with her young rider instantaneously from view among the windings of the hills.

Evelyn was in the saddle at the same moment. The soldier, used to ride barebacked, stirrupless, every possible way—did not hesitate for a single second. His hunter and himself were both as fresh as when they started, and it seemed as if, with miraculous quickness, the horse seized the intention of its rider, and was gone !

Like the winged steeds of Walküre, these two had flashed from sight and vanished. When Tom, wild with excitement, rushed on foot round the sharp bend to the left, behind which they had disappeared, there was no sign of either to be seen, only the lowering moor in its dark, desolate silence, and leaving on its springy turf no trace of the fugitive's feet.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A LAND NOT INHABITED.

We two stood there, with never a third,
But each by each, as each knew well.

ROBERT BROWNING.

"To horse! to horse!" shouted Tom. "A pursuit, a capture! Hurry, Greville, Forde, Mollie! Let us overtake them!"

"Oh, yes! Go! go! Muriel and I will not mind being left!" burst out Leo. "Oh, be quick! be quick!"

"But in which direction?" cried Greville, ashy pale, as at last he adjusted, bungling in his frantic haste, the misplaced bit, and galloped a little forward.

"God knows!" cried Mollie. "I only pray the Major was in time to see which way she went."

"We will have a try, at all events," said Greville, between his teeth; and he started off at the fastest pace his horse, a very sober-minded hack, could be induced to adopt.

Tom and Forde followed him, Mollie remaining to guide the girls safely to the hanging Tor, in view of the now imminent rain.

And Hope rushed onward, into the forsaken regions she feared so much—into the black shadows of the land not inhabited.

Peal after peal of thunder echoed in the hills, flash after flash of lightning terrified the frantic mare afresh. The young girl, motionless, upright in the saddle, holding the reins with a grip which was pain,—the moist air, heavy with coming rain, whistling bleakly past her,—wondered where it would end.

It would all be over soon—how? where? How long had she been rushing along so madly? A moment? A lifetime? Was death near? was the knot of her difficulties to be cut like this?

The events of her life—of last year—of last week, seemed to be ranged before her. How fast her life had passed! How little she had done in it! And how trivial and small everything seemed, which was so apparently important. Could nothing stop her? Was no one near?

She began to sway in the saddle.

What was that, gleaming before her, on the ground, a long way off, white and pallid? A line of white chalk? A road? A *river*? Yes, that last. It was much nearer now. It grew wider, and more terrible.

It was the river fed by rushing Ghyl. That torrent by which she had stood and watched—those clear waters she had admired! They were the waters that were to drown her.

Did she want to die? she hardly knew; she was too unnerved, too nearly unconscious, to think even of trying to turn the mare's head. She strove to pray. A shout, a cry behind her; she was too confused to catch the words.

A rush of vehement hoofs on the turf.

Then something dark and swift shot up abreast of them, a hand snatched at the bridle; there was a violent swerve, a jolt which unseated the fainting girl in an instant, and after that, it came, the sensation Hope dreaded so acutely, the horrible consciousness of being hurled out into space, the sickening thud of limbs falling in a confused heap on the turf; and a loud singing in the ears blotted out, for a minute, all other sounds.

A weight, which had rested on her feet, was moved away. She moved a little, but a pain in her head shot so sharply through it that she sank back again, and closed her eyes. She might as well die so, she dimly thought, out on the savage, storm-beaten hill-side, her cheek upon the thymy grass. Everything

was quiet. No peal of thunder sounded. She moved her hands together, to say a prayer before she died. She was not unconscious, yet she felt as if she could not move, and considered whether her back or her neck were broken, as she had heard that, in such a case, one suffers little pain.

Something cool touched her forehead, some cold, wet application was made several times across her brow and temples; surely a human hand must be near—she would not have to die quite alone.

She opened her great eyes; pathetic and dark they seemed, in her small wan face, to the excited man bending over her.

She looked up. They were Evelyn Westmorland's dark features which met her view; and in an instant all her dormant vitality was awake, her eyes blazed, the blood rushed to her cheeks, and with a determined struggle she rose—first to her knees, then to her feet, and managed to stagger several steps away from him in vehement haste, to a low stone wall near, on which she rested her hand to support herself, and gasped for breath.

She was alive, no great injury had been done, limbs and spine were certainly intact: she felt only a great faintness, an unsteady heaving of the grim, frowning heavens and bare ground around her and the hateful consciousness of the presence of this enemy, this man who had insulted her.

She found her voice.

"Tom!" she cried, pitifully. "Tom! Oh, Mollie! Muriel! Tom! Come here to me! I am all alone!"

The terrified accents were drowned by another terrific crash of thunder; the steelly gleam of the lightning lit up the turgid surface of the stream; and there was a mad rush of hoofs on the hollow, reverberating ground.

Evelyn started. Peony was off, beyond all hope of recapture. He had pulled her in so violently as to cause her to swerve, and, her foot coming in contact with a large loose stone, she had stumbled, shooting

her rider over her head. This part of the hillside was covered with scattered stones, crumbled from a low ruined wall, and, when Peony got up, he saw that both knees were badly cut. This inspired him with a new terror : if Hope's head should have come in violent contact with such a stone !

Peony was so trembling, so meek and depressed by her fright that he had led her to one side, and left her standing, head drooped, and sweating sides, and, with no further delay, abandoned himself to the task of attending Miss Merrion.

Now she was gone. On the whole, perhaps it was as well. They would have been obliged to lead her, and, terrified as she was by the thunder, she might have been an emphatic hindrance. But her departure roused him to look at his own horse, which stood, however, obediently where he had left it, its bridle hitched to a projecting stone on the top of the wall. It raised its head, and, with distended nostrils, sniffed the air and trembled, but it remained quiet.

He had never in his life felt so agitated, so perplexed, so stirred, through and through, as at this moment. It had not struck him, as it might have done, that Hope Merrion would infallibly reject any overtures of help from him. His own forced coldness had so instantly deserted him at sight of her peril—his long-stifled fierce heart had flamed up so vigorously—he had so bent all his indomitable will, all his terrible persistency on the idea of serving her at all risks, that he had well-nigh forgotten the feud that existed between them.

When her glorious eyes opened upon his, the expression she had seen there had been one of passionate thankfulness. Fool that he was ! Thrice fool ! He had burnt his ships. Poor wretch ! by offering her that one marked, gratuitous insult, the intention of which could not be mistaken, he had thought to end it all at one blow : because, to have her standing there in the moonlight, holding out her hand, had been torture too desperate, too acute for

him to bear. Loyalty to his betrothed, loyalty to his particular friend,—how was it to be kept if Hope and he were reconciled?

And so he had done it, and so he had gained this satisfaction of having wantonly deprived himself of the right to help her, of the right even to offer her the common services of humanity. She recoiled from him as from one unworthy to touch her: and it was only what he might have expected.

Well, the others would be up directly; he could resign her alive, and not much hurt, into the hands of those she loved; only all his life long he could hug to his heart the blessed consciousness of having saved her, of having been quickest of all those there to follow her: no one could rob him of that satisfaction.

He went up to his horse, patted it and soothed it, with one eye on the gap between the ridges, where every moment he expected to see some of the party appear, the other on the forlorn little figure seated bareheaded on the low wall, her face hidden in her hands.

He could not bear the sight; physically, it hurt him to see her; there, so weak, so in need of help, and yet divided from him by so impassable a barrier.

He strode up to her.

“Miss Merrion, are you hurt?”

No answer.

“Do you feel pain anywhere?”

Still no reply.

“For God’s sake speak to me!” he cried, suddenly breaking out, words seeming to rush to his lips without his own will. “Curse me, if you want to, but say something,—tell me if you feel pain.”

She moved her hands away from her white face. Oh, God! how it went to his heart, that iron compression of the sweet little mouth!

“Go away,” she said, with her eyes blazing upon him. “I would rather die alone here than have you with me.”

“Would you?” he said, recoiling with a start, and

he put his hand over his eyes,—“would you? Oh, my God!”

There was a moment's pause, then again the cloud was rent, and again the artillery of heaven rattled in the hills. The first great heavy drops of the rain that was coming were dashed in Evelyn's haggard face. No time was to be lost, he must get her sheltered somehow, somewhere, if not with her will, then against it; and, as he mentally measured his strength against hers, he smiled.

Hastily he looked along the way he had come: there was no sign of any human thing approaching. At the top of his speed he ran to the summit of the ridge on whose slope they stood, and gazed around. The sight was terrible. Purple masses of swollen cloud dragged themselves over the bosom of the moor, shutting out the distances altogether: no living creature was in sight; at about a mile's distance he could see that it was already raining with tropical fury, and bearing down upon them with frightful speed. The drops stood out on his forehead as he wondered what on earth he was to do to shelter her. To be drenched through, so many miles from all hope of being able to dry or change her clothes, might kill her.

Ah! it was not over yet. It was still his mission, his glorious privilege to take care of her. Even in all his perplexity, anxiety, agony of mind, he had leisure to revel in the grand thought, that, in her dire need, she was absolutely dependent upon him. The thought was life. It seemed to inspire him with the courage, strength, wits of twenty men.

As his keen eyes flashed round their inquiring glances on all hands, he spied something which, in the strange gloom, looked like a bit of ruined castle—a piece of crumbling masonry in grey stone. Whatever it was, there was more hope of shelter there than on the open hillside. To get her there was the immediate thing to do. He was at her side in far less time than it takes to tell it.

"The rain is coming," he said, panting; "we must shelter till it is over. Come this way, or you will be wet through."

"I will go nowhere with you," she cried, recoiling from him. "If you really wanted to help me, you would try to find one of *my friends*, instead of insulting me by forcing yourself upon me."

"There is nobody to be seen, far or near," said Evelyn, decisively. "They are probably taking shelter from the storm, and so must you. I don't care whether you like it or not—you must come with me."

"I will not!" she cried, in real fear; "I will be drenched to the skin first! Go away and leave me!"

The heavy rain dashed in her lovely, wilful face. Evelyn's eyes grew very bright; he pulled off his rough tweed coat.

"You will put this on," he said to her, calmly.

"I will not—I will not stir! *I hate you!*"

"I daresay," he answered, between his teeth, "I daresay you do; but you *shall* do as I tell you. I am stronger than you, and I will make you do it."

In a moment the coat was on her, she scarcely knew how; a cap, which he pulled from the pocket of it, covered her bare head, and then he caught her hand and ran. Outraged pride, fury, fear made her gasp, and sob, and tremble. On they ran, down the hill, towards the building, the situation of which Evelyn had clearly noted.

Lo! between it and them flowed a shallow brooklet, which fed the stream lower down. He was in a mood not to be hindered now. He caught Hope in his arms, waded warily through the water, and dashed up the ascent on the other side. Nor did he pause until he had entered the ruined cottage, for such it proved to be, and could set her down upon a dry floor, with a tolerably sound roof over her head.

He rested against the wall a moment, panting for breath, was but instantly aroused by the expression of Hope's face. He had set her gently on her feet, for

he could not lay her down on the bare floor of beaten earth ; but she seemed as if bewildered, or not knowing where she was. She stretched out her hands, groping as for support. He started forward and caught her just in time, for everything was swimming round her, and she clutched his shirt-sleeve involuntarily, even while crying, excitedly,

“ Lay me down—lay me down on the floor ! ”

He did so, with a stone for a pillow. Tenderly he let the little curly head rest upon it, and arranged her with as little discomfort as possible.

“ You will not be afraid of being left alone a few minutes ? I want to fetch my horse,” he whispered.

She shook her head.

“ You will stay here while I go ? ”

“ Yes.”

He rose, and went out into the deluge. The rain was literally tearing up the smoking ground in its fury. Gaitered though he was, his boots were already full of water from wading the brook. In another minute he had not one dry thread upon him. He cared nothing at all about it ; his veins were filled with a new fire, his heart with a great strength. He ran as though he had wings to his feet, till he reached the place where stood the patient hunter, presenting a truly dismal appearance in his dripping condition. Springing on his back, Evelyn galloped him through the brook, and tethered him safely in the other room of the cottage, the roof of which was still water-tight in places.

He busied himself for awhile with taking off the saddle, and giving the horse a scrape down with a bit of rusty iron which he found. Then he made a somewhat abortive attempt to dry his own short, dark locks with a pocket handkerchief, as the water which continually trickled down his forehead, and dripped from the tip of his nose, impeded the distinctness of his vision.

He glanced through the open doorway at the motionless girl on the ground, gave himself a vigor-

ous shake or two, and wondered what he had better do next.

The first move was to consult his watch, and his relief was great when he saw that it was only a quarter to four. It was not dusk till seven—three hours of daylight were before them, so he judged it might be safe to wait half an hour, at least, to give the thunder and rain a chance of abating.

He felt decidedly anxious, for he did not know in the least where they were. Mollie's shooting lay in quite a different direction, and he had never, till that day, been anywhere near Rushing Ghyl; however, from that point, he did not doubt being able to find his way home, and thought it more than likely that the party they had lost would shelter somewhere near, and await their return. The difficulty was, to get back to the place whence Peony had started on her wild career. In the headlong haste of his pursuit, he had scarcely noticed the direction taken, nor could he recall any landmarks which they had passed. Every faculty had been so concentrated on the safety of the girl before him, he had heeded nothing else, nor had he ever doubted that some of the others were following him. On reflection, he had no idea of the distance traversed, nor of the time taken to get over the ground. It had seemed a very long way; but, as it was still so early, he was forced to believe that they could not have come so far as he had imagined. There was still a chance that one of the others might succeed in finding them; failing that, a sudden hopeful thought darted into his mind—there was the river! According to all his calculations, this must be the stream which flowed from Rushing Ghyl; they had, therefore, only to follow it upwards, to arrive, sooner or later, at the point whence they started. Certainly, under these circumstances, they could afford to give the weather a chance of mending. It must be a terrible risk to expose any girl to the present rain—less only, he decided, than the risk of being overtaken

by total darkness in an unknown country. There was no moon, as he knew.

The idea of mounting, and riding up the river bank to join the others, and tell them of her safety, now occurred to him. Dare he leave her—his charge—in such a wild, lonely, unfriendly spot? He hardly knew.

Approaching the doorway, he looked in again upon her. His heart ached for her, he knew that she ought to be warmed, fed, and comforted, and he was so powerless to do either; he wished he were one of those thoughtful men who always carry about a brandy flask, for contingencies.

As he gazed upon her, all the tenderness of his whole nature kindled, he detected a slight shaking of the shoulders, and the sound of a suppressed sob. He could stand it no longer. Venturing in, he knelt down beside her, and gently drew away her hands from her face.

CHAPTER XXV.

IT GROWS DARK.

A moment after, and hands unseen
Were hanging the night around us fast.

ROBERT BROWNING.

“WHY are you so unhappy?” he asked, pleadingly.

“Oh, go away! Please go away,” was her bitter, sobbing cry.

“I can’t! I will not!” he asserted, mutinously, “don’t ask me to leave you. I swear I will not speak to you, if that distresses you—only let me be near you, and ready at a moment’s notice to render you any service you may need.”

“Don’t touch me!” she said, moving further from

him. "To be left alone is all I ask. I cannot bear you to be near me. Go as far away as you can."

"Out into the storm?" he asked, bitterly.

"Oh, no," she said, "not that!" and after a little pause, "no, not that—I am too selfish."

"What had I to expect?" he groaned. "It is right you should treat me like a brute. I accept my punishment; you are just."

He rose from her side and moved away. His very soul seemed scorched with the yearning, the craving which possessed him to speak out—to give her her revenge, to tell her the biter was bit, and that he loved her.

Loved her?

Not till now had he owned it to himself in straightforward words. Loved her? Rather, he worshipped her! Oh, to tell her so! To be free to go and cast his homage, manhood, life, strength, all he had, or was, at the feet of the little humbled, weak creature who lay there so still, so sad!

The variety of conflicting feeling which surged up in his heart maddened him. He no longer tried to struggle against this overmastering love, nor to deny it. He could only, as it were, stand face to face with it, regarding it with a mixture of horror and a new secret joy.

He loved her, but his traitor tongue must never tell her so; he was not free, but bound. He had forced a promise—a confession of love—from innocent Leo, and he was no longer his own, but hers.

And so she, this Hope—whom he had so injured and so adored—must lie and weep upon the ground; he might not lift her tender body from the hard earth, nor rest her weary little head, with its soft, damp, brown curls, against what seemed its natural resting-place—his heart. But oh! he cried out in his blind folly, might they not be friends?

Ah! she too had wished to be friends; and her little modest effort towards reconciliation had been met with insult. His misery was approaching a climax.

He was standing before the forsaken hearthstone, overgrown with white flowering nettles. On their coarse leaves fell heavily two drops which had never come from the skies. He started, moved to the broken, crumbling window-sill, knelt on the floor, and hid his face in his hands ; his broad shoulders shook with the passions which rent him.

He had never been able to understand men being in love ; and now it appeared as if that injured divinity were determined to give so presumptuous a mortal a taste of his sovereign might. It seemed as if invisible cords were drawing him, invisible hands urging him, to fling his honour to the winds, to forget Leo Forde, to tell Hope Merrion that he loved her. He was obliged to grasp the rough stones with his hands to keep back the torrent of words which rushed to his lips, the great cry of his long stifled heart.

He prayed silently. The paroxysm passed away ; the soldier returned to his duty. She was here, in his care, this tender, defenceless girl. He was bound, by every claim of manliness and chivalry, to keep his own feelings in the background, whatever they might be, to think only of her.

He was roused from his reverie by a startled cry.

"Major Westmorland ! Major Westmorland ! Are you gone ?"

He was on his feet in an instant.

"No, no ! I am here—not so far off."

"Oh, I was afraid you had gone away and left me alone !"

"Not quite such a brute as that," he said, huskily. She raised herself painfully on one arm.

"Oh, I am so stiff—I ache so."

"I would have made you more comfortable if you would have allowed me," he suggested, humbly.

"Will you not let me try ?"

"Help me to stand up, please."

He did so, his heart throbbing excitedly as he raised her. She seemed unable to support all her weight at

first, but, after a minute, disengaged herself from him and walked to the window.

"How fast it rains!" she said; "but I am better—well again now. I think we ought to find the others; where are we, do you know?"

"I have a pretty fair idea," he said, speaking as encouragingly as he could to console her. "I think I can take you back to—your friends in safety. I fancy they will, if possible, remain in the vicinity of Rushing Ghyl—I heard them speak, just before your mare bolted, of a place near where there was shelter; and they probably feel that we shall be more likely to meet there than wandering about in the moor."

As he spoke, he came a little nearer to where she stood, and he saw her flinch. The hot colour tingled in his face; she was indeed avenging her wrongs with pitiless rigour.

"You say," he resumed, after a pause of deep mortification, "that you feel better? You think you are not much hurt?"

"I am sure I am not hurt at all. I feel—all right," she said weakly, but determinedly. "Oh, why will not this rain cease?" she added, wringing together her hands feverishly, and standing with her back to him.

"I think, as you find my company so intolerable, that it will be best for me to take my horse, leave you here, and ride to Rushing Ghyl to fetch one of your—friends. I am sure I can find the way."

"If you will be so kind, I think it will be best," she answered, with dignity.

With swelling heart he went into the next room and returned, carrying his saddle. Near the wall, in the most sheltered part of the mean, draughty place, was a heap of stones. Arranging these with some care in the form of a seat, he placed the saddle upon them upside down.

"Now," he said, "I think, if you will sit here, you will be as comfortable as I can make you. I will arrange some stones as a footstool for you."

Turning slowly, she looked first at his arrangements then at him, hesitatingly.

"But you—you will have no saddle," she faltered.

"It makes no difference to me," he replied, in a hard voice.

The fire, the strength which had inspired him, had all died down, leaving him weary, stiff, and cold; his features, always decided, looked very set and haggard. He stepped, rather ostentatiously, as far from her as he could, and waited. She was feeling so weak that any kind of seat was inviting to her eyes; she crept towards it and sat down.

Kneeling before her, he arranged some stones to keep her feet from the cold floor, and then rose.

"I shall be as quick as I can; good-bye," he said.

"Good-bye," she replied, not looking at him.

And then it seemed too cruel, too rude to let him go like this—without a "Thank you." Whatever it cost her, she must say something.

"Major Westmorland——"

He turned, about to enter the other room, and waited in the doorway.

"I want to thank you."

"Oh—what for?" he asked, grimly.

"What you have done for me——"

"Nonsense. I would rather hear you say something else,"—his great chest heaving—"rather hear you forgive me than thank me . . . But you won't do that!"

"I think," she said, very unsteadily, "that you have earned forgiveness: see here . . . the very coat off your back! Could Christian charity go further?"

For a moment his grey eyes lighted up with a wonderful new gleam; then once more the light sank out of them.

"Ah!" he said, sadly, "the score you have against me can't be wiped out so easily. I'm not such a fool as to think so; but, all the same, thanks for speaking kindly to me—it is more than I deserve."

He turned away too suddenly to see the rush of tears in her eyes.

Afraid to trust himself a moment longer, he hurriedly let his horse loose, and led it out of the cottage,—not without difficulty, the doorway was so low.

Just as he was mounted and turning away, a cry recalled him. Looking back, he saw Hope in the doorway, beckoning him to stop. He rode up to her.

“You must not go,” she said, trembling, half-crying. “I don’t know how it is, nor why I should be so foolish, but I cannot be left alone—not all alone! I don’t like to have you here, but I cannot bear to have you go! . . . What am I saying? Yes, go! Go, of course! Take no notice of what I say—you must go!”

The rain pelted down upon him as he sat, coatless, on the bare-backed horse, before this inconsiderate young woman.

“Am I to go or stay? I wait your orders,” he said.

“Stay!” she cried, after a short struggle, and, turning, ran back to the cottage, sinking upon the seat he had provided.

He patiently dismounted once more, shaking the rain from his clothes, and indulging vehemently in a few arm exercises by way of keeping up the circulation. Then he went and stood as close as he could to the horse’s warm side, and leaned his arm upon it.

His eyes looked wearily out upon the desolate, dripping prospect and saturated ground. It was pouring so fast that he believed it must soon abate. A little longer waiting was his portion; yet he felt that it would have been wiser to go.

It seemed to him as though thoughts, hopes, desires, regrets, mad longings were crowded into these moments, enough to last him all his weary future life through. His life had been so uneventful! never happy, but never miserable. His father’s

hardly veiled scorn of his character and attainments, joined to a disposition sensitive and shrinking, and a want of self-assertion almost criminal, had caused him always, as a matter of course, to take a back seat everywhere. He had escaped the disagreeables which always result to a more impulsive, active spirit, but he had also missed the pleasures. He had, in truth, never felt very violently about anything or anybody, until he met Miss Merrion. He knew now, that it was her strange, unexpected, undeniable power to make him *feel* which had inspired him with so hot an antagonism. Into the man's very soul these unfathomable eyes had pierced. They had awakened sensations which he never knew he possessed. The very sound of her voice, the very sight of her slight figure, leaning daintily back in a basket chair, even the scent of the violets she nearly always wore, seemed to touch new springs of being, to show him new possibilities of a happiness he had sometimes vaguely longed for, but never seriously believed in.

Well! Even in the depths of his miserable consciousness that in some way his life was going horribly wrong, even in the throes of the wonderful new knowledge that he could, and did love, desperately and passionately—the man's long cherished self-control stood him in good stead. He faced the future resolutely.

He loved a woman who did not love him—who shrank from his touch, even from his presence in her sight.

Very good: that love should and must be utterly crushed. He could do it, and would do it, at whatever cost. His whole life, thoughts, and cares should be given to the girl who was to be his wife. To-day's brief mutiny of thought should be trampled ruthlessly out of existence. To do his duty had always seemed so simply, obviously right; was he to shrink now because such duty was hard? He—a soldier?

He lifted his face again from where he had hidden it, in his horse's neck. The aspect of the weather alarmed him greatly.

The character of the rain had changed from streaming thunder torrents to a quiet, steady down-pour. All around them the sky had closed in to a uniform leaden hue. It looked like a wet night.

Moreover, it was growing so dark. Had he not known otherwise, he would almost have imagined that the dusk was falling. He snatched out his watch, and his heart seemed to jump to his throat as he did so. It was the same time as when he last looked at it—a quarter to four.

It had stopped, of course !

He bitterly called himself a fool, an arrant fool, not to suspect that it must be wrong, when he looked at it first ; he might have known, by the time they started, that it could not possibly have been so early. Thinking over it again, he came to the conclusion that it must have been five o'clock at least when he first consulted it. It was now, then, almost six. In an hour it would be quite dark.

The perspiration stood on his forehead. After all his resolutions to take care of her, he had played the fool, he told himself, and allowed his own feelings to make him forgetful.

Rain or no rain, they must start at once now, or she would have to pass the night in that horrible place.

"Oh, that I may only be able to get her to Rushing Ghyl in safety !" he cried, in an agony, to his own heart, as he entered the other room.

Hope was sitting with her chin resting in her hands, her eyes fixed on the ground.

"We must start at once," he hurriedly said, "rain or not. It is growing so late."

She struggled to her feet, evidently stiff and bruised, but faced him pluckily.

"It is later than I thought," he confessed, hurriedly. "My watch had stopped."

"Is it growing dark?" she asked, apprehensively.

"I am afraid so," faltered he, looking at her with a world of self-reproach in his great grey eyes.

She caught the look and tone, and going up to him, held out her hand.

"I am not afraid," said she, simply.

So, for the first time, Hope Merrion and Evelyn Westmorland clasped hands.

Neither spoke, nor did he dare to hold his treasure long. Reverently he let it go, and in an instant was re-saddling the hunter, with new energy in his movements, new life in his heart.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HOW THEY PARTED.

A turn and we stand in the heart of things ;
The woods are around us, heaped and dim.

ROBERT BROWNING.

THE sudden presence of great anxiety made a difference in the Major's feelings, did away with self-consciousness. He simply wrapped Hope up as if she were six years old, and he her nurse ; tying the cloth-cap on her head by means of his handkerchief which he fastened in a bow under her chin, buttoning his coat tightly round her and turning up the collar.

"Oh, Major Westmorland, do take your coat," she pleaded, "you will catch your death!"

"Nothing of the kind," he replied, shortly, as he led her out into the rainy twilight, and lifted her upon the tall hunter.

"You can manage without the pommel?" he asked.

"Yes, oh, yes, I think so."

He lifted his face a moment to her, when she was mounted.

"Keep up your spirits ; please God, I'll bring you home safely," he said, earnestly.

"You are very good to me," she answered, humbly.

He set his face like a flint, and they went forward. The outlook might have depressed the stoutest heart. So low did the clouds hang that they could only see quite a short way in front of them ; the rain still fell fast, and the ground was like a sponge.

Evelyn went doggedly ahead. He was obliged to keep quite near the stream, and it soon became apparent that it wound in and out most tediously ; moreover, the point for which Peony had made, appeared to be the only bit where the banks were not steep. This involved a continual and most tiring scrambling up hills and down again, much of which he thought they might have avoided, had he been able to see further before him.

However, on he went, as fast as he could move over the heavy, soaked ground, spurred on by a terrible anxiety, running a race with the approaching night. To converse was impossible, only every now and then he turned up his face to ask the question,

"Are you all right?"

To which the brave voice answered at once,

"Yes, all right, thank you."

At the end of half-an-hour, to Evelyn's thankfulness, a slight increase in the light was apparent, the clouds seemed to be less dense. Part of the low trailing vapours swept away, revealing before them an apparently endless waste of dull, monotonous frowning moor. The rain also did not fall so heavily.

"Courage !" he said, cheerily, "it is going to clear !"

The hope was illusive. Another canopy of cloud swept over the brighter space, and brought fresh rain with it. The dusk fell deeper and deeper, and Evelyn began to grow frantic.

What was he to do ? What plan could he possibly

think of, to shelter and protect his treasure? His mind was torn with conflicting thoughts—would it have been wiser to remain where they were, after all? Might they not wander all night in this waste howling wilderness, with the rain dripping on their heads? How much more could she bear? Women were so tender, he knew.

At this point the horse put his foot into a hole, and stumbled. The light was so bad that Evelyn could not see where he was treading; he foresaw that, in half an hour, they would be wrapped in the utter gloom of a rainy, moonless night.

He almost thought it must be a nightmare, from which he should awake soon, so strange, so improbable did the whole matter appear.

That Hope and he should have become so utterly cut off and separated from their fellows; that this fearful storm should have immediately followed; that his watch, usually entirely to be relied upon, should stop to-day of all days!

He was at his wits' end. To all appearance, they were as far from the bridge whence they had started, as ever; and they had been hurrying along for an hour mostly at a jog-trot. They must have covered nearly five miles.

They mounted, as his reflections reached this pitch, to the top of a pretty steep hillock, and he saw, as soon as he gained the summit, that about a hundred yards ahead the river emerged from a thick, dark wood.

Here, indeed, the darkness would be profound, yet to enter this wood seemed the only thing to do, for lose sight of the water he dared not, and the extent of the plantation seemed considerable—it reached as far as the gathering obscurity allowed his eye to follow it.

On gaining the spot, a ray of hope kindled in his heart; for he at once saw that there was a tolerably well-trodden footpath under the trees, near the river's side. Moreover, so thick were the branches above

that very little rain penetrated, and he was able to unscrew his aching features, distorted with an hour's fruitless endeavouring to see with his eyes shut.

"Are you afraid?" he asked, in a low voice, as the little cavalcade plunged into the shadows.

"No," replied the low, steadfast voice, "not with you."

The strength of those words urged him on for a quarter of an hour in patient discomfort, feeling his way in darkness which grew continually darker. The path and the stream parted company, the path striking into the woods, and the trees growing so thickly each side of it that to forsake the track and plunge into the wood seemed likely to be almost impossible.

There was nothing for it but to follow this path, he thought—it must lead somewhere.

Hope saw that he halted.

"You are very tired," said she, gently.

"Oh! not tired—not tired, only so nonplussed," he said, in most depressed accents. "What are we to do?"

"You must follow the path," she said; "it must bring us out somewhere. Courage a little longer."

He went on without another word; and in about ten minutes his anxiously peering eyes saw a sight which made him cry aloud in the excess of his relief.

"Thank God! There's a light!"

"A light?" cried Hope, tremulously. "Oh, yes! I see it;" and she began to shed a few tears out of sheer weakness.

They hastened onwards, with hearts too full for further speech, towards the friendly ray. As they drew nearer, the trees grew less dense, and presently, in the midst of a small clearing, they stumbled on what seemed to the bewildered Major more like an Esquimaux village than anything he had ever seen. A collection of six mounds made of earth and boughs of trees placed close together, the tallest not as high as Evelyn's head, and the whole railed in by a roughly

constructed fence. From the open entrance of one of these came the light of a lamp and the glow of a coke fire. Three or four children of various ages stood about, apparently watching some culinary operation; a woman stooped over the fire.

"Well, I'll be shot!" cried the Major, as he beheld this scene. "What on earth is it?"

They were charcoal-burners' huts; but, oddly enough, he had never seen such things. Hope had, and she told him what they were.

Meanwhile, the interest of the natives was, of course, strongly excited. Out of the gloom of the pitch-dark evening, a knight, a lady, and a steed suddenly flashed from the dim recesses of the wood. The youngest, to whom the said wood was doubtless an abode of bogies and other bugbears of a childish imagination, began to whimper.

"Now, what are you arter with Teddie there, Sam, you varmint?" said the mother from within.

"Moder, 'ere's a lady and a gennleman," shrilly cried an elder olive-branch.

"Don't tell the childer no lies, 'Lizbeth. I'm ashamed on yer."

"Moder, there do be a lady an' a gennleman on an 'orse, a great big 'orse!" vociferated Sam, dancing on his bare feet.

The baby set to work to yell at the full pitch of its lungs; the mother rose, and came out of the hovel, bringing her light with her. So thick was the foliage of the trees under which the huts were built that neither rain nor wind could penetrate. She was a woman with a sweet and serious face, and a look of being above her lowly position—clean and fairly neat, as also were the healthy-looking children, except the goggle-eyed baby, who, after the fashion of his class, was covered with tears and grime.

Evelyn addressed her eagerly.

"Can you tell me how far we are from Rushing Ghyl? We have lost our way," he said, hoarsely.

"Dear!" said the woman, with a compassionate

look at Hope. "It's about three miles to Rushing Ghyl from here, sir."

Three miles! And, after that, seven more across the open moor! He dared not risk it.

"Miss Merrion," he said, in a low tone, "do you feel as if you could wait a while in this place?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Hope, faintly. "I think I must. I—don't feel as if I could go on any further."

He touched her hand. It was icy cold.

"Have you anything to eat or drink?" he hurriedly asked the woman. "Any bread? or milk?"

"I've bread, sir, and a drop o' milk; but not more than enough for a cup of tea or so."

Evelyn lifted Hope from the saddle, and her exhausted head drooped wearily against him.

"She is so wet and cold," he said. "Now, children, will you see if you can help the lady!"

"Ay," said the children, herding gravely in a group, but expressing much good-will with their eyes.

"Let her sit by the fire, sir," said the sweet-faced woman; and Evelyn was astonished to see how ingeniously the interlacing boughs lined the hut, and how clean was the interior. There was a chair in the quaint place, and he seated Hope upon it, looking anxiously at her ashy face, with its tendrils of forlorn, wet hair, and dripping cap.

The woman, who could not anyhow have entered the hut while Hope and Evelyn were both inside, produced a rough but clean towel and handed it to the strange gentleman, who thanked her abruptly, and as he tenderly removed the lady's wet headgear, asked if the kettle boiled.

It did. The woman proved sensible, eager and helpful. In a very few minutes Hope had swallowed some hot tea and a small piece of bread.

"She's wet through, sir—she did ought to have everything took off of her," earnestly said their hostess. "Couldn't you leave her to me, sir?"

Evelyn looked doubtfully at the mean, wretched

place ; then consideringly at the serene eyes of the speaker.

"See here, sir," she went on, simply, "my man ain't home to-night—he's burning over to Rossertleys, and sleeps on the farm. I'll sit up with the lady. I'd just lighted this bit o' fire to give the childer some hot porridge. That they shall have and Pollie'll pack 'em all off to bed. Look !" she produced two dark woollen blankets, "I was washin' all to-day till storm come, and these has been hangin' since yesterday, an' as sweet as moor-breezes can make 'em. I'll bring in my mattress, an' roll 'er in these ; she can't do no harm, I don't think, sir."

Evelyn turned to Hope. She was lying back in her chair with closed lids, and was holding his hand, probably unconscious that she held it. He knelt down by her.

"Miss Merrion !"

Her eyes languidly opened.

"Yes? I hear."

"Will you stay here with Mrs.—Shepherd? thanks! —with Mrs. Shepherd, while I ride home as fast as horse will carry me to tell them you are safe?"

She fixed her look upon him wistfully.

"Shall you be gone very long?" she whispered.

"I will be as quick as I can—you know I will," he said soothingly, his traitor heart leaping for joy, "I would not leave you, but I think I must—I ought! It will be nearly three hours before I can get back, I am afraid, as it is a strange road. You will let me go?"

"Yes."

"Good-bye," he said. "God bless and keep you."

"Good-bye," she softly sighed ; "and—and—you won't be long?"

"I promise not to linger a moment."

"Thank you. Please go now."

He lifted the hand he held, and laid his lips upon it. So much it was impossible to help. Warmly, yet reverently, he kissed it, and laid it down upon her

knee as if with it, he renounced all hope, all happiness.

"Drink a cup of tea before you go, sir," said Mrs. Shepherd.

He shook his head.

"Keep it for her—make her drink some more," he said, unsteadily, as he put on the coat which had been sanctified by containing her little form. "Only tell me the nearest way."

The footpath, she told him, would bring him out upon the highroad leading to the very bridge where they had dismounted. The road was quite straight—he could not miss it. Putting a sovereign into her hand, he mounted again and rode off, feeling as though he left his life behind him.

When he emerged from the wood, stars were visible through rents, here and there, in the clouds. The white road was clearly distinguishable from the dark hedges, and the rain had ceased to fall. He was able to travel at the fastest pace his horse could command.

As he dashed along, the sound of the hoofs crashing in the wet road, he caught sight of two mounted figures, apparently awaiting him at the top of the next hill. Then he heard a shout, which he answered as loud as his hoarseness would permit, and, on riding up, recognised Tom and Greville.

"Where is she?" was the cry which broke from both—the only greeting he received, and, as he did not immediately answer, Greville added, "Good God!—You found her, surely? You know where she is?"

"Yes," gasped Evelyn, "I know where she is."

"Not killed! She was not killed!" cried Tom, in tones that rent the Major's heart.

"No, no, Tom, my boy, not killed," he hastened to assure him, "not even much hurt, as far as I have been able to judge."

"Then where is she?"

"About three miles from here, in a charcoal-

burner's hut," he said wearily. "Where have you two come from?"

"Straight from Leaming," answered Tom. "Mollie, Greville, and I have been scouring the moor till the dark fell so as to make it impossible to do more; Forde, like a good fellow, took home the girls,—so she is safe! Thank God! But Mollie knew you would take care of her. 'She's safe with Westmorland,' he kept on saying."

"Did he?" said Evelyn, with a sudden gladness, "did he say that? But she is terribly exhausted, and has been much exposed to the rain—I did not know what to do for the best. We were sheltered in a ruined cottage."

"What!" cried Tom.

"A ruined cottage near the river."

"Why—well!—You mean Peony bolted all that way before you could stop her? We never thought of looking so far as that! Those are the ruined mines! What a mercy she did not go down a shaft!"

"It must be five or six miles from here, I think?"

"Quite."

CHAPTER XXVII.

SHE HAS COUNTLESS VICTIMS.

Worth how well, those dark grey eyes,
That hair so dark and dear, how worth
That a man should strive, and agonise
And taste a veriest hell on earth
For the hope of such a prize!

R. BROWNING.

So all was over; Evelyn had resigned his trust, the precious burden of sole responsibility for her safety was his no longer. Tom was for riding on at once to see with his own eyes that she was safe, but the

others dissuaded him from this. If Hope was having her things dried, he could not see her; if she were asleep, she had better not be disturbed until the carriage was there to take her home. Besides, neither Greville nor Westmorland knew the way back to Leaming without him; Greville, who would have given his eyes to go to her, was entirely at sea in a strange country. The best thing they could all do was to return home as fast as possible, relieve the anxiety of the others, and despatch the carriage at once to bring her back.

On the way, he told a part of their adventures, but his great and increasing hoarseness made it impossible to say much. He was faint and weak with hunger, and his saturated clothes were agonisingly uncomfortable. It seemed to him as if ages passed away during that dark, cold ride. A certain constraint was upon all three men. Tom and Greville, jealous of each other, were yet more earnest in their combined feeling of jealousy of Westmorland. To one or other of these two, her special devotees, it was manifest that the rescue of Miss Merrion should have belonged; that it had been given to Westmorland, who cared nothing for Hope, and was undoubtedly on the brink of an engagement to Miss Forde, if not already plighted to her, was, as Greville discontentedly reflected, the unsatisfactory kind of thing which always does happen in real life. How much more dramatic and suitable it would have been, could he have followed and protected her, and so established that claim on her gratitude which would have bestowed so dainty a flavour of romance on their commonplace nineteenth century courtship. It was certainly a most perverse fate.

This unexplained feeling of dissatisfaction weighed upon their spirits, and made them silent, only anxious to urge forward their horses, and expedite the starting of the relief party as soon as possible.

At last the lights of the Manor House appeared, and scarcely had the latch of the drive gate clicked,

when the front door was opened, and the four anxious watchers appeared.

Westmorland started guiltily as the lamplight fell on Leo's pretty, wistful face, it was so long since she had been in his thoughts.

At first, he had, scarcely time to greet her, for all his explanations had to be renewed, and the clamour of voices rendered it difficult for anybody to understand anything. The charcoal-burner's settlement was, most fortunately, known to Mr. Lyster; they had been there since the beginning of the summer, and were respectable people. The anxious servants flew to make ready the brougham, and fill it with wraps and restoratives. Peony had arrived home not an hour before, in a crushed, depressed, and limping state; they were afraid she would have to be shot. So much Evelyn gathered; also that Muriel and Leo had ridden home in the pouring rain with Richard Forde, that the others had scoured the moor till night-fall, hurried back to Leaming to see if by any chance Evelyn had brought Hope back, and, finding that nothing had been heard of the missing pair, snatched a mouthful of food, and were off again.

Every one seemed to be talking at once, the sound of the voices surged almost meaninglessly in the Major's ears; he felt unequal to describing or explaining himself in any way, he could only reiterate that, so far as the fall was concerned, he did not think that Miss Merrion could be much hurt; she stood, walked, ran immediately afterwards.

"That is indeed something to be thankful for," cried poor Mollie, in tones of boundless relief. "Such an incident, such trouble, such a catastrophe, to spoil the happiness of your visit! and I feel so responsible! Well, Muriel, are you ready to set off? Shall you and I go and fetch Hope back?"

"Oh, Mollie, let me come!" cried poor Tom, in accents of despair; but this was decided against. There was no room for him in the carriage; Mollie would not hear of his going outside, after all the cold

and rain to which he had been exposed. Greville felt himself taking an unkind delight in the knowledge that no one else was to be allowed the privilege which he knew he had no right to claim.

"Meanwhile, we are all forgetting Major Westmorland," said Muriel, as Mollie wrapped her cloak about her. "Please to take him into the dining-room, Dr. Forde, and make him eat something, he must be dying of hunger."

Evelyn stood mute, a troubled expression on his face. He was thinking of his promise to Hope, in the queer little mud hut. She had made him promise to come back for her. He had foreseen, in his temporary oblivion of all things but himself and her, no difficulties in the way of fulfilling this assurance. Now, he plainly saw it to be out of the question. Why should he, of all the party, be desirous of going? Mollie knew the place, so had need of no guide. Even Richard Forde, in his capacity as doctor, had a better right than he. And would she miss him? Would she even mark his non-appearance? Decidedly not; true, in the absence of any other familiar face, she had seemed to cling to him, but, with Mollie and Muriel to comfort her, was it likely she should even remember his existence?

Oh, better—better so! No more danger, no more anguish, if it could be avoided. If she did by chance bestow a thought upon him, it would be that he had not kept his word; he had promised to return, and he had not returned. So best. Let her think so of him—she would not then feel bound to torture him with thanks or gratitude. Let this be the end. Never, while he lived, would he see her face again.

"He is as hoarse as a raven, and hasn't a dry thread on him," interposed the doctor energetically. "Westmorland, go upstairs and change at once, if you don't wish to have rheumatic fever—I'll bring you something hot to drink."

Evelyn looked meditatively down at the puddle

which had collected on the tessellated paving-stones where he stood.

"I am rather wet," he slowly observed. "Yes. I think, as—as I'm not wanted any more, I will go upstairs and change."

He moved towards the stairs, but, as he went, his eyes fell on Leo's sweet, sympathetic face, looking eagerly at him, with tears swimming in her eyes. He made an effort to smile at her, even while he realised that the sight of her was acutely painful—just now.

"I hope you will be no worse for your wetting," he said, constrainedly. "I am not fit to speak to you now, I must go and make myself respectable——"

"In bed!" cried Richard, sharply, seizing his arm and dragging him off. "You want wringing out, like a sponge, I declare! I never felt anything so saturated, in my life!"

Evelyn obediently went with him, and submitted to the hot bath, the energetic rubbing, and the whisky which the doctor considered necessary.

"But of course I am all right," he said, doggedly, "I am pretty tough, as you know, Forde. I shall not be a penny the worse for this to-morrow,—you will see! What time do we leave here for the station?"

"I really don't think you ought to travel to-morrow."

"I mean to, so there is no need to waste breath," declared Evelyn, rolling his now inconveniently hot person about in the large bed. "What a fuss to make about a trifle! I'm all right, I tell you."

Richard stood looking down upon him, thinking what a fine fellow he was, from a physical point of view, and also how incomprehensible from the moral standpoint.

"Leo has been very anxious about you," he remarked, after a pause.

"I am sorry to hear it," replied his patient, blushing like a girl. "It was most unfortunate, but un-

avoidable, you see. I was the only member of the party who was mounted at the time."

"Yes : that just made all the difference. I fancy Mr. Greville would have given something to be in your saddle."

"Greville?"

"Yes ; a good fellow I should say. Miss Merrion could hardly do better."

Evelyn lay silent, his arms raised, his hands joined under his head.

"Oh—is that it?" he said at last.

"Obvious enough, surely?"

"Oh, yes—I suppose so."

"Because you are so unimpressible, it does not follow that other people have no eyes," laughed Richard. "Miss Merrion is more than attractive, she is bewitching ; they say she has countless victims. I only wonder that you have not succumbed ; that Leo should have conquered when she was by, is an additional source of elation to me, I assure you."

Evelyn set his teeth and closed his eyes. The doctor had very unconsciously administered a tonic which began to work almost instantaneously.

After he was left alone, the Major repeated those words over and over again,

"They say she has countless victims."

And one of these was Evelyn Westmorland, who, of all men, had best been armed against her fascinations. In the teeth of all that he knew from Disney, he had allowed this madness to overtake him. She had jilted his friend—that was the charge against her : which charge she had admitted. No new facts had transpired ; there was no reason why he should think better of her now than before. And yet——

He thought of the small sad face, the sweet lips so bravely set together, of the way in which she had shrunk from him, of the voice which had cried, "*I hate you!*" Had her conduct, from their first meeting, been that of a designing woman? He thought not.

"You fool," he muttered, "what do you know of women?"

But still he felt, still he owned to himself, in his exceeding truthfulness, that he would give everything but honour to hold her once, only once, in his proud arms—to have her eyes meet his once, only once, with a love that answered his own—to feel her damask cheek pressed against his sunburnt one, to clasp her close—closer——Ah, God! it was delirium. He was only a unit among *countless victims*—let him remember that; and, meanwhile, there was consolation in the fact that no one knew of his madness. No one knew, nor ever should; he had been preserved—miraculously, as it seemed to him—from the sin of telling her. Had his trial lasted much longer, he confessed that it might have been otherwise.

So he lay tossing and struggling and very miserable in his mental disquiet, till he heard the rumbling of wheels under his window. They were bringing her home. He sat up, listening. The sounds rose but faintly from the hall below. What were they all doing? What an ass he felt, he unamiably told himself, to be put to bed like a tired baby; and it was only a quarter-past ten. He had a mind to get up and go downstairs. No! At whatever cost, he would *not* see her again.

He flung himself down among his pillows. Eagerly he strained his ears for fresh sounds, but his room was a long way from the stairs, and he could distinguish nothing clearly. He lay very still, to catch the lightest footfall, but an oppressive silence reigned around, and he could not understand it. And suddenly he was no longer in bed—what could have made him think so?—he was leading a horse through the tangles of the wood, and the night was very dark. Leo sat on the horse, and she plaintively cried to him to take her home.

"I never would have engaged myself to you, if I had known you would be so unkind," she sobbed; and he could not comfort her, though he prom-

ised to take her home as soon as they had found Hope.

"We must find her, you know—must find her," he whispered. "Near here there was a break in the trees—a charcoal-burner's hut; she is there, waiting for me. I promised to come and fetch her."

And now the strange, furze-thatched huts were before him, but dark; all was dark within, and he beat against the door. What became of Leo and the horse he could not tell; but a sweet-faced woman stood before him, and said, "Hush! she is asleep; you must not awaken her."

"Let me in—let me in!" he cried, unheeding; and she softly asked,

"Can you be hard and bitter on such a night as this, so full of stars?"

Frantically he set himself to climb the furze thatch, so as to reach his love through the window; and, as he climbed, the wall stretched up higher and higher, he grew no nearer to the top for all his striving. The rain beat down upon him, the darkness was impenetrable, and he trembled, panting with his terrible efforts. At last he reached a little window, high and remote, and, clinging to the window-sill, looked through.

A white shaft of moonlight streamed down an immeasurable distance, lighting up a cathedral aisle, and the narrow bed on which Hope lay, white and still. Upon her they had placed her anchor, wreathed in flowers: her little pale hands were folded over it.

"Hush!" said some one, "come away; they are going to shut up the coffin."

"Not till I have said good-bye to her," he cried aloud, "I tell you I will and must say good-bye to her first!"

He sprang in, and felt himself falling, falling through an endless depth: when in his agonised ears there rang the sound of the hammer striking blows on Hope's coffin: and with a hoarse, wild, desperate cry he leaped from his bed, and found himself standing

on the floor, a cold sweat bursting out on his skin, his knees knocking under him.

At the same instant Forde entered.

"Did I startle you? I did not know you were asleep," he said. "What a yell you gave! Were you enjoying a nightmare?"

"Ye-es," gasped Evelyn, sinking upon the bed. "What is it? What has happened?"

"I only looked in for a moment on my way to bed; I thought you might be glad to know that Miss Merrion is quite wonderfully well—in fact, she is almost unhurt, and the charcoal-burner's wife seems to be emphatically a trump."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DISCARDED LOVER.

Entre deux êtres aussi complexes et aussi divers que l'homme et la femme, ce n'est pas trop de toute la vie pour se bien connaître et s'aimer dignement.

COMTE's *Philosophy*.

THE cold weather which followed the thunderstorm seemed to change everything. The heavens were grey, the air chill, the first frost of the season had nipped the gay flowers in the gardens.

Captain Edgar Disney anathematised all northern climates with the true fervour of the Briton lately returned from the tropics, as he stood on the draughty platform of Norchester station, awaiting, with much impatience, the arrival of the Doncaster train, with his horses and groom.

They are very amusing studies, these Anglo-Indians. You go to call upon one of them who is in England on furlough some lovely day in the begin-

ning of summer. The weather is so genial, you are revelling in it, blooming, expanding in the welcome warmth. You find the Anglo-Indian sitting in a darkened room, on the cool side of the house, ice-water bandage on his brow, iced drinks at his side; the page-boy, with scarlet countenance, is lustily agitating two large fans, designed to remind the sufferer of a punkah: an enormous white umbrella and a bark helmet with a puggeree lie on the ground.

"Execrable climate!" pants the victim, "far hotter than I ever felt in Calcutta! Suicide to go about in the broiling sun as you fools of English do! No arrangements in any of the houses for summer heat! You ought to have sun-blinds to every window; marble bath-rooms; verandahs; take a siesta!" "Do you call to-day hot?" you ask, in mild surprise. "Hot, sir!" cries the outraged one, "I never felt so hot in India—never!"

To said India, next year, he duly returns; and, in his first letter to you, you observe these words:

"Of course the heat here is perfectly grilling—you English can form no idea of it! I never felt thoroughly warm once all the time I was in England: no proper conveniences for heating your houses; no system for warming halls or passages! Execrable climate!"

You spend fifteen minutes in a praiseworthy endeavour to systematise the climatic views of your friend, and then you give it up; reflecting that, after all, when the English invented umbrellas and mackintoshes, they did about all they could towards making things pleasanter in this watery isle. And, spite of the good advice you have received, on the forthcoming four and a half hot days of summer, you neither darken your house nor sit in the cellar, but go out and allow the coy English sunshine to renew your youth, and the enterprising midge to embellish your person, as you drink tea under the copper beech on the lawn.

Disney was in a rare mood to find fault. He had

left London a few days back, finding its closeness insupportable, its emptiness intolerable. Taking advantage of the very cordially-worded invitation which his friend Forde had dashed off to him in the first impulse of his sympathy, he had promptly started to Norchester, hoping there to find fine weather and a hospitable reception. Neither was forthcoming. Forde was away, and, the very day after his arrival, down came the rain in torrents, breaking up all the heat, leaving the world chilly, wind-swept, and grey.

Eminently sociable, and devoutly hating his own company, he had established himself at the "Swan Inn" in the market place, and killed time with much difficulty, many cigars, and a sporting novel, until it was time to go up to the station and get his horses. He had no definite idea as to when Forde would return: some time that day, he believed; but telegrams are not explicit, and the cordial letter with which Richard had supplemented his, had not come to hand, because it was addressed to Minstergate, where he believed his friend to have taken up his quarters. Disney determined to call at Forde's on his way down, and find out what time he was expected. Meantime, he walked up and down briskly to keep himself warm, and, in true British fashion, roundly abused the unpunctuality of the trains to the servants of the company.

These all listened with much deference and sympathy: they knew a cavalry officer when they saw one; and, in truth, the Captain's outward man was sure to enlist affection and admiration wherever he went. He was rather tall—certainly slim, but compactly built, with a head that would not have disgraced a Praxiteles, covered with sunny, closely-clipped hair, full of ripples and ridges which would have developed into curls had the barber permitted. He was very sunburnt, and this made his large, clear blue eyes more noticeable; his nose was straight, and his long, golden moustache might have made the

most humble of men vain. No suspicion of vanity lurked, however, in the frank, winning eyes and smile. It was a very irresistible face, and, even now that he was confessedly out of humour, there was something about him which made every one look twice at him, and feel the better for any sight so goodly and pleasant.

The leisurely train steamed at last casually into the station, as if conscious of having the whole day before it ; and Disney hastened in the direction of the horse-boxes.

It was a great relief to find that the mare had behaved with exemplary fortitude, and soothing to see the delight with which she rubbed her loving nose against his coat-sleeve. His cart was there too, and every porter in the station hastened to give a helping hand.

"Not such bad time as I feared, sir, neither," said Joe, the groom, the Captain's devoted bond-slave and adorer.

Disney turned his head to look at the station-clock, and saw a sight which arrested his eyes at once : and for a moment he forgot his mare, his cart, everything which had been previously paramount.

A girl stood on the platform, alone. Her face was turned partially away from him, he only saw the outline of a smooth cheek, and coils of dark brown hair ; but her figure was drawn out clearly against the cloudy sky beyond, and his quick eye noted and appreciated at once its indescribable careless grace. She wore a very simple dark blue travelling dress, and in her hand was a bunch of magnificent late roses, whose opulent colour seemed a centre of warmth and light in the dreary landscape. The point of one irreproachable boot was just visible beneath the severely simple skirt.

As if the gazer's earnest scrutiny had some magnetic attraction, she turned and looked at him ; and, as her absent glance rested upon him, it quickened into aroused attention. Her eyes were glorious, he told

himself in real admiration. All the glamour, the unutterable attractiveness of youth and splendid health were here. After a moment of looking straight at him, the girl withdrew her eyes, and seemed searching for some one, for she threw an impatient glance around her. Just as Disney was wondering whether he dare offer any help, or whether he had better send a porter to her assistance, a gentleman was seen, moving up the platform quickly, a bag in hand, a wrap over his arm.

"Here it is," he was saying, reassuringly; and Disney with a great start, flinging away his cigar-end, came forward, crying eagerly,

"By all that's utterly unaccountable, Westmorland, where did you spring from?"

If he had started, his start was nothing to the Major's, though of course Evelyn should have been more or less prepared for the meeting, knowing Disney to be in Norchester.

He displayed a countenance in which appeared the strangest—apparently, the most uncalled-for emotions, a passion of sympathy, struggling with a sense of conscious guilt; the first thing, however, which struck his friend was his appearance of illness, his haggard face, wan under its sunburn, the purple rings under his great grave eyes.

"I am pleased, more pleased than I can say, to meet you, old man," he cried. "I have been literally yearning for the sight of a friendly face! But I must say you don't look over brilliant: right down ill, I should say! What on earth have you been doing to yourself?"

Evelyn was dumb; perhaps surprise kept him silent. This radiant, dashing, jovial Edgar Disney was to his mind as little like a forsaken lover as he himself, in the Captain's eyes, probably resembled an accepted one.

But Leo came to the rescue. She raised her limpid eyes to Disney's, full of a charming comprehension.

"I think—I am sure you must be my brother's

friend," said she, hospitably extending her hand to him. "Did you come to meet us? How kind of you!"

"Miss Forde," the Major found himself able to murmur explanatorily at this point.

"Miss Forde!" cried the delighted Disney, clasping the little hand. "Are you really Dick Forde's sister? I am, indeed——" "in luck's way," was on the tip of his tongue, but, on reflection, he thought it better to leave the sentence an eloquent fragment; and, before more could be said, Dick himself appeared on the scenes, his mission having been to charter a fly and see the luggage piled thereon.

"Hallo! there you are!" was his greeting, most wanting as to words, most cordial in tone, and there was a hearty hand-shaking. "We hurried home on your account; delighted to see you looking so fit! Westmorland, have you introduced my sister?"

"I guessed who it was," said Leo, with a pretty assumption of dignity which had come into being during the last three days, "so I partly introduced myself. I have heard so much of Captain Disney."

"Nothing bad, I hope?" he cried, laughing light-heartedly.

"Nothing in the least bad, I assure you."

"I wonder at that! My misdemeanours are so manifold I could hardly have thought it possible that any one could talk much of me without mentioning them! But Forde is charitable!"

"It's a great relief to find you in such capital form," said Forde, smiling. "Westmorland told me very dismal stories about you."

"Did he?" said the young man, with a quick glance at Evelyn, "he ought to be ashamed of himself, and I think he must have been speaking of himself and not me at the time. Did you ever see a man look more seedy? What has he been doing?"

"Oh, he had quite an adventure yesterday," said Forde, "and it is folly for him to be out to-day. I expect he will be laid up."

"An adventure, eh, Westmorland?" said Disney, easily.

"Caught in the thunder-storm yesterday, at the top of Limmerdale with a lady," laughed Richard. "Her horse bolted, and threw her; he didn't know the country in the least, and had to get her home somehow."

"I hope," said Disney, gravely, "that she was young and pretty, I wouldn't have poor Westmorland grew rheumatic for the sake of a plain woman." *Rest*

The look of dumb agony in Westmorland's eyes was strange to see; it was as though the light words had hurt him physically,—he scarcely heard Leo's eager, loyal cry of:

"She is beautiful! the loveliest girl I know!"

He set his teeth together, and said nothing. Even Disney, though of course failing utterly to understand, gathered generally that on this point he was mutely implored to restrain his wit, and, with his usual quickness, turned the subject instantly, by lamenting that the Fordes should have hurried back to Norchester on his account.

Leo hoped that Martha had made him comfortable, which elicited the fact of his being at the "Swan," and he was vehemently bidden to repair at once thither, and bring over his things, an invitation which he was but too ready to accept. How different a world it was, from what it had seemed an hour ago! Leo's girlish beauty had infused summer into his skies with a glance.

He explained that his errand to the station had really been to receive his horse and his groom. The cart was duly exhibited and admired, also the pretty black mare, which Joe was already placing between the shafts.

"May I drive one of you down?" he asked Richard.

"Thanks, but I think Leo must come with me, and Westmorland takes leave of us here; he goes up to Hesselburgh, where his father is staying."

"Oh—is that it?" said Disney, looking from one to the other in a rather puzzled way.

He felt that he did not quite understand the situation. Dick's manner was hurried, and he seemed to be labouring under a suppressed excitement; and, as for Westmorland, his perturbation could not have escaped the notice of the most casual observer. What did it mean?

He felt Evelyn's hand on his shoulder.

"I suppose you don't feel like giving me a lift towards Hesselburgh?" he asked, in a voice which plainly said, "I have something to say to you."

After a moment's reflection, Disney answered,

"I shall be very glad."

It was contrary to his nature to leave the side of any pretty woman, but there was the enchanting prospect before him of a week or more to be spent in the same house with the beautiful Miss Forde; and, besides, he might get some explanations out of Westmorland, for really the attitude of the two men was suggestive of something out of the usual way.

CHAPTER XXIX.

I AM AFRAID YOU MISJUDGED HER.

"Oh, heart of mine, marked broad with her mark,
Tekel, found wanting, set aside!

. . . See, I bleed these tears in the dark. . .

If it would only come over again!"

ROBERT BROWNING.

"GOOD-BYE, for a very short time," said Major Westmorland, in a low voice to Leo, as he helped her into the station fly. "I shall in all probability bring my father to see you this afternoon."

Leo trembled, turned scarlet, then pale, and lifted beseeching eyes to him.

"Oh—I am so frightened!" she said plaintively.

"I have assured you that there is no need; he will be overjoyed," he answered, kindly, taking her shy hand encouragingly, but she searched his eyes in vain for the look of tender mutual understanding which makes one of the most exquisite delights of love; again the forlorn sensation of something wanting crept coldly over her, but her experience was so slight that she was but too ready to believe herself foolish, unreasonable, longing for impossibilities.

He stood back, watching her drive away with her brother, and, as soon as they were out of earshot, Disney's eager voice broke on his ear.

"Well! Never be surprised at anything you see. To think of Forde's possessing a sister of that description! Forde, of all men! Real good sort, but plain and steady-going—hey? Shouldn't you say so?" Standing on the station steps, he lit himself a fresh cigar, and the match-light flickered over his exhilarated face. "That girl, I tell you," he cried, "that girl has points that ought to win her first prize in any beauty-show where the judges knew anything about it. Of course she is a bit young, too thin, and so on, but in a couple of years I'm hanged if you will be able to pick any hole in her anywhere; she is a beauty."

Evelyn looked at him in an astonishment so great as to engulf even his resentment; instead of objecting, as he naturally might, to having his *fiancée* discussed and admired from this exceedingly technical point of view, he said, after a speechless pause,

"You carry it off very well, Disney, but you needn't put it on with me, you know. I can sympathise with you."

"Eh?" said the Captain, in surprise almost as great, surveying him as he got into the cart. "What's the matter now?"

He gathered up the reins and made fast the neat apron to the strap in the middle,

"Up with you, Westmorland, and let's get things explained a bit. Let her go, Joe, and you be off to the 'Swan' in the market-place, get your dinner, and engage the stable for a fortnight certain—d'ye hear?"

Joe touched his shining hat with military smartness, and in a minute the cart was spinning up the green lane which led to Hesselburgh, and then Edgar turned his beautiful eyes on his companion, and said blithely.

"Now then, what's up?"

"Disney," said the Major, "I feel as if I—as if I hardly understood you. I expected to see you regularly cut up."

"What! Has anything happened?" cried the other, quickly, "because, if so, I wish you would speak out. I can't stand this sort of thing, you know."

The Major mused for a moment, and then said slowly,

"When I last heard from you—not much more than six months ago—you said you were heartbroken."

"O—o—oh!" softly cried Edgar, and was silent, while a shadow gathered darkly over his bright face, and a pained look passed into his eyes. So marked was the change, that sympathy and remorse for having touched such a painful chord leapt simultaneously into Evelyn's heart, and involuntarily he half stretched out his hand, then drew it back.

"Heartbroken," resumed the driver, after a long silence, "well, I believe I was, for a time. I have never been so hard hit, certainly." He flicked the flies from the mare's head with the whip, and an absent look was in his eyes, as though his thoughts were travelling back into the past. "That *was* a fascinating girl, Westmorland," he said with a long sigh.

Evelyn cleared his throat, in which a lump seemed to have risen.

"I must tell you, that I," he began, with his usual tardiness of utterance; but Disney interrupted him.

"I would have sworn black was white, had she asked me," he said, bitterly. "I was mad about

her; but you know—you know these things are not incurable, whatever novelists may say on the subject."

Evelyn was moved to indignation.

"You seemed to think you were incurable at the time, judging from your letters to me on the subject," he said, his heart beating excitedly, his breath coming quickly.

"Ah, well! Such a cool old hand as you are, my boy, knew how to make allowances for what a fellow felt obliged to dash off in the heat of the moment."

"Disney!"

"Well—take an analogy," said Disney, coolly. "You were wounded in action, were you not, in the Murrepore insurrection? What can a man do, when the ball is in him, but writhe and curse his fate? Didn't you feel as if you would be glad to die and be out of your misery? As if it was too much to bear for the time? But what happens? They get the ball out, and by-and-by you come to feel some sort of satisfaction in being alive again, to take an interest in things, to go about and gradually to think less of your wound. You have got an ugly scar to carry about with you to your grave; but it does not materially affect your comfort, or your pleasure."

"They get out the ball," said Westmorland, in a low, choked tone. "But suppose they can't do that? Some balls go too deep."

Disney did not immediately reply, but drove on, turning the subject over in his mind. At last,

"I should have a thorough contempt for a man who could allow such a thing to spoil his life," he declared, firmly.

"Oh—certainly—I suppose so," was the Major's mystified reply.

"What care I, though fair she be, if she be not fair for me?" laughed his friend. "She couldn't have cared for me deeply, you know, or she would not have turned me over; and, you see, I'm such a faulty fellow, the woman who loves me must take me,

faults and all. Her love must be great enough to overlook them."

Again he considered.

"Of course I know she thought she was doing right when she broke it off," he began, hesitatingly.

His beautiful eyes kindled and his colour rose as he made the admission. Evelyn looked at him with an indescribable mixture of feeling. His agitation was so great, he could scarcely control it. He had judged this man by his own standard—by his own loyal, but utterly exceptional ideal of constancy; he had been guilty of the inconceivable folly of imputing to Edgar Disney the principles which would have actuated Evelyn Westmorland. It had been quite inevitable; it is the mistake made by every one in this game of cross-purposes which we call life; but singularly disastrous had its effects been in this case.

"Don't you see," he said, hoarsely, with feverish earnestness, "that, if that is so, she may have cared for you all the time? I mean this. If she really, as you say, believed it right to give you up, she would do it, however great the love she bore. She would do it on principle."

Disney laughed a low, melodious laugh of scepticism.

"Oh! I don't believe in that, you know—not when people are in love," he answered. "A woman in love doesn't get time to think of such out-of-the-way, inflated sentiment——"

"Sentiment! It's a question of right and wrong," growled the Major.

"You don't quite understand. I suppose I had better give you the *casus belli*. It was——" he hesitated again. "I tell you this in confidence, Westmorland, because you are good enough to take, as it seems, a lively interest in my affairs and morals. It was a garrison flirtation, and I am free to confess that I behaved pretty badly. It was all stopped, of course, directly *she* appeared on the scenes; but the girl was a—a simple-minded girl, and she thought I meant

more than I did. I believe she took it terribly to heart, and it all came—somebody told—well, the ins and outs of it would be a long story, but the result was that—er—Miss Merrion came to know *her*, and to know all about it; so she sent for me, and asked me if it was true.”

“Yes?” was Evelyn’s breathless question.

He felt as if he could see Hope at the moment—as if he knew the expression of her eyes and mouth and chin.

“Ah, well! I couldn’t deny much of it,” heavily replied Disney. “I hadn’t realised it—hadn’t expected she could think of it so seriously as to form a barrier. When she—dismissed me, I could not believe my ears.”

Evelyn closed his eyes.

“She considered me bound in honour to this girl,” went on Edgar. “She was right, theoretically; I can own that now, though then I was feeling too much about it to be able to see any side but my own, and I still think she laid too much stress upon it. As I said, women in love don’t act theoretically.”

The light rattle of the wheels in the sandy lane was the only sound for a while; then he resumed,

“I suppose these things happen for the best, you know. It might have been rather a bore, after all, to have your wife sitting in judgment on you from such an altitude. She said she despised me, and that no happiness could come of marrying a man she despised; and I expect she was right about that. She made so much out of it: what had I done? Only what any fellow does, times and again. She was a governess—this other; impossible, you know: pretty but dull: one grew tired of her. Now one would never, during a hundred years, tire of Miss Merrion. Jove! I wish you could have seen her, Westmorland! The sort of woman to twist herself in and out your heart-strings, and make you feel—pshaw! What’s the use of trying to describe her, after all?”

Evelyn struggled with that strange impediment

in his roat, and brought out his confession in a grating voice unlike his own.

"I have seen her," he said.

"Seen whom?" asked Disney, with listless inattention.

"Miss Merrion," faltered the other; and then their eyes met.

"You have seen her," meditatively repeated Disney, as if retracing in his mind all that he had said of her during the foregoing conversation.

"Where?"

"She is staying here—at Hesselburgh."

His companion pulled the mare up short, and turned on him with a heightened colour and agitated manner which proved him to be perhaps less perfectly recovered than he had imagined.

"Is she there now?"

"Oh, no! At Leaming—we left her there. It was she who was thrown from her horse, yesterday."

"Ah!"

There was indeed food for reflection here on the part of both men. Westmorland was still reeling under the shock of discovering that Disney treated his recent love affair as an episode—painful and memorable indeed, but still an episode: and handled it with a certain impartiality which seemed to relegate it to the remote past, and so upset every notion he had formed about it. The character of Disney's meditations was partly revealed by his first question,

"Does she know that you know me?"

"Yes."

"I don't want to meet her, Westmorland."

"Not?" said Eveyln, faintly, wondering if such a desire were possible on the part of a man once admitted for a time to the Paradise of Hope Merrion's love.

"Of course not—it would be pretty awkward for both of us," said Edgar, sharply. "What do you think of her—eh?"

"I—have seen very little of her," faltered the

Major. "Your letters had given me an entirely false view of the case ; I imagined that she was a that she had treated you badly and I kept my distance."

"You *are* a good old sort, Westmorland ! Something like a friend !" laughed Disney, with affectionate gratitude, "but your zeal was a trifle misdirected. I am afraid you misjudged her."

"I did," replied the Major, aloud ; and in his sore, desolate heart he cried, "God forgive me !"

"She—I hope—she was not hurt, yesterday ?" hesitatingly asked Edgar.

"I hope not—I believe not. They said she seemed to be pretty well this morning. Of course I did not see her before coming away."

"What made you come away ?"

"I came to tell my father my news"—a pause, and then, in his deepest tones, he continued, "I am engaged to be married to Miss Forde."

"You know, Westmorland, you never were any hand at greening ; drop it, that wouldn't deceive a baby."

"I don't want to deceive anybody ; I am engaged to Miss Forde, and I wonder you should think me capable of joking on such a subject," was the prompt and stern reply.

"Why on earth," cried Disney, "couldn't you say so before ? Are you crazy ? Allowing me to discuss her in that way, and to criticise her points ! I never came across such a fellow in my life ! Engaged—you—to Miss Forde ! Well !"

Evelyn had no answer to give : he could hardly say that his thoughts had been so full of the woman he loved that he had scarcely so much as heard what was said of the girl he was engaged to.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE WOMEN'S SANITARY LEAGUE.

Child of an age which lectures, not creates.

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.

"THE programmes are my great difficulty," said Mrs. Saxon, perplexedly. "I wish Muriel were at home. I was counting upon Mr. Westmorland to draw them up, but evidently he is not well enough to be troubled about anything."

"What do you suppose is the matter with him?" asked her Athelstan, anxiously.

"He is fretting himself ill because the Major won't marry. I have an idea that he hoped something might ensue from this visit to Leaming, for he seemed in such spirits when they all started, and was such a help to me over all these W. S. L. preparations: but that note I had from his son this morning, saying that he was coming back to-day, seems to have cast him down most terribly. I fancy he thinks he has been rejected by one or more of the three."

"Not likely—eh?"

"How can I tell? The unexpected always happens, you know. But this does not settle the question of the programmes, and I shall have Miss Dinwiddie here this afternoon."

The poor lady's blotched and heated countenance did not improve her appearance. She wore a fawn-coloured cloth suit, and a deer-stalker to match, in somewhat painful proximity to her brick-coloured brow. She and her husband stood just before the front door of Hesselburgh, and watched the erection

of a huge red-and-white-striped marquee on the lawn. There was an air of bustle everywhere—gardeners were busy with mowing machines and rollers, some of the stablemen and boys had been pressed into the service to trim borders, and nip dead geranium-blooms. The grey skies and cold wind took the heart out of things in general, and made the preparations seem dreary and futile.

At a little distance from Mrs. Saxon stood a lady of uncertain age—thin, sandy-haired, and spectacled. She was clad in scanty, lank garments, which conveyed the impression of being insecurely fastened at the neck and waist. She held a note-book and pencil, and was apparently jotting down a description of the house and grounds, for she frequently glanced up and around.

“I think that will be all, thank you,” said she, presently, approaching and speaking in a voice and manner which Mrs. Saxon would have characterised as hopelessly affected had she been a well-dressed, fashionable-looking woman. “How soon do you expect Miss Dinwiddie?”

“Shortly : she will be here as soon as the Richester train gets in. If you have really done, you must come and have some lunch, Miss Sharpley.”

“Oh, how very kind you are, dear Mrs. Saxon ! The W. S. L. ought indeed to be grateful to you.”

“I hope it is ; at all events, it shows itself so by accepting my invitation to parade itself in my grounds. May we have a better day than this, that’s all ! Athelstan, take Miss Sharpley and give her some lunch.”

“Indeed, yes, my dear ! This way Miss Sharpley,” cried the zealous *aide-de camp*.

“You would like to stay and see Miss Dinwiddie ?” called Mrs. Saxon, after them.

“If you please, dear Mrs. Saxon.”

The hostess folded her arms, stared at the rising marquee, and fell into a reverie, from which she was aroused by the sound of footsteps behind her, and,

looking up, saw Mr. Westmorland feebly advancing down the hall.

"Ah, my friend, are you better?" she said, kindly. "I am taking a minute's breathing-time, and looking out for our secretary."

"Miss Dinwiddie? Ah! it will be pleasant to meet her again. She, as well as your special reporter in there, are outcomes of the age we live in—an article for which there was no call in the market thirty years ago; I wonder how long the demand will last?"

"What, the demand for intelligent women?" smiled Mrs. Saxon. "Not very long, I fear; only as long as there are intelligent men."

Mr. Westmorland laughed quietly.

"What makes intelligence take that particular form, I wonder?" he said.

"Which form?"

"The form of Miss Sharpley."

"All clever women are not like her."

"Granted; but, do you know, in confidence I will own to you that I shall be glad when the day comes when women are intelligent as a matter of course, and do not make a vocation of it."

"I always did think you only half-converted," said she; "but, apart altogether from the suffrage, any sane person must agree in the absolute necessity of this Women's Sanitary League. Take the most domestic view of women—take Goethe's view of them as the useful, economical, uncomplaining, unpaid servants of men, and there is all the more need for them to be sanitary. I believe the bishop is going to make a point of that. A knowledge of the laws of health and cleanliness is as essential to an under-housemaid as to a Girton graduate."

"So you have really got the bishop to preside?"

"Both days. Dr. Compton, of the London Health League, is to speak afterwards, then Sister Mary Eleanor, from the Cricklewood Fever Hospital, then Mrs. Nash, who inspects laundries, and Miss Burton,

who inspects women's workshops in Richester. In that long white tent a model hospital ward is to be fitted up, with nurses in uniform, and various members of our Sunday-schools as patients. In the further one is the model laundry, and beyond the model kitchen. In the large drawing-room an exhibition of sanitary clothing and bedclothing. If we could only be sure of fine weather."

"My dear madam, it is bound to be a success, whatever the weather. All your *objets d'art* are under cover. Your energy is beyond all praise; you deserve that the whole of Norchester should at once form itself into one gigantic health organisation."

"As you know, it is with the idea of starting a branch in Norchester like that at Richester, that I am making this experiment. The bishop is a great ally, he will draw crowds; with the late bishop it would have been hopeless, as he belonged to that once numerous school of theology which thought famine, pestilence, and disease the will of God, and that it was wicked to try to prevent them."

"Many traces of that creed still linger in various forms," said Mr. Westmorland, "it's not obsolete."

"Then," proceeded the lady, "there is your paper, to which I am looking forward more than anything, but for which I have not found a name; about not forgetting beauty in the search for health."

"I shall be bashful before so many authorities."

"Oh, nonsense! And Canon Shorthouse will read a short paper on the system of the Roman baths lately discovered in Norchester. And now I have only two days in which to get the programmes printed, and I do so want your advice. I have telegraphed to Muriel that she must really come home from Leaming at once."

Mr. Westmorland's brows darkened as he heard the mention of Leaming.

"The attractions there seem to be great, to everybody but Evelyn," he sneered. "What on earth is he leaving for, I should like to know."

"I daresay he finds it dull," calmly said Mrs. Saxon. "The life there would not suit everyone, and he is a soldier, and used to action."

Evelyn's father made a gesture of ineffable disdain.

"Dull! With those three lovely girls! He is not a man at all, if he thinks so."

"You are hard upon him."

"I have before told you that my son is a great disappointment to me."

"And I will not hear a word against him. I consider him a model son."

"If he were a man of great talent, one might pardon his eccentricity," said the parent, drily. "But he!—I suppose he has forgotten all he ever learnt, and that it would be an effort to him to translate a page of Homer! Never opens the classics, that I know of."

"He is an excellent tactician," retorted Evelyn's defender, valiantly, "for the General told me so. He said, 'Westmorland might not have the originality to plan a campaign, but he has got the sense and the pluck, and the coolness and the daring, to carry it out!'"

"Why didn't he stick to it then?" testily asked the invalid.

"Why, it was your doing! He gave it up to be with you!" cried Mrs. Saxon. "His love for you was stronger than his ambition."

"Love for me? He has none! I repeat none! He does not consider me in the least; neither had he a spark of ambition; he was simply glad to catch at a suggestion to come home and be idle. I asked him about it at the time. I said to him, 'Now, don't go sacrificing yourself for me: have you any feeling of reluctance? Do you care?' and I well remember his answer. 'I don't care a straw,' said he. 'I don't care a straw.' That man ambitious! No indeed!"

Mrs. Saxon was silent.

"He is unfeeling, that's what it is," went on the father, crossly, "and it seems to me hard, as I said

to you some few weeks back, that my only one should be such a clod. However, I seem to suffer in common with all other modern fathers ; no more control over our sons than if they were not related to us. It is hard, but you tell me it is salutary, and I suppose it is. To have every hope blighted in this world, is more likely to turn our thoughts towards the next."

He spoke with an air of patient resignation, and looked very handsome and exceedingly ill-used as he stood against the porch. He shivered in the bleak air.

"I am afraid I must go in," he said presently, finding she did not answer his pious lament.

"The brougham—Miss Dinwiddie—I must wait to receive her," said Mrs. Saxon, eagerly, as the carriage came in sight ; and for a moment he forgot his grievance, and his face lit up with an amused smile.

"I must wait and see her, she is always worth looking at," he murmured.

The prospectuses of the Women's Sanitary League bore as the name and degree of their chief secretary,

Miss Christina Dinwiddie,

formerly Matron of the Slate Street Hospital.

This certainly conveyed an impression of age and dignity. What Miss Dinwiddie's age really was, is a question not to be deeply probed : but her appearance was most undoubtedly that of youth. She had a rather pretty face, and a perennial smile which was somewhat too suggestive of a cat. An aureole of curly auburn hair waved above her brow, and framing this, at the back of her head, was a huge brown velvet hat with a quantity of brown and yellow feathers. She was wrapped in a long brown cloak, which showed its yellow lining here and there.

"Dear Mrs. Saxon!" cried she, "how good of you to send to meet me!"

"I could hardly expect you to carry your luggage three miles," replied her hostess, in her uncompromising way.

"And Mr. Westmorland!" cried the secretary, holding up her hands. "I declare," coquettishly, "that you will frighten the life out of me when I am on the platform, Mr. Westmorland! I shall be so afraid of your criticisms."

"I never criticise ladies, Miss Dinwiddie, especially when they are handsome."

This was a very different type of compliment from that which he would have offered to Hope Merrion, but the event proved that he knew how to please.

The lady blushed and sparkled, and cried "Oh!" as if she were fresh from a second-rate boarding school. Mrs. Saxon smiled oddly.

"Well! we have indeed a friend in you," pursued Miss Dinwiddie gushingly, as she looked around. "What an event this will be! The whole north is talking about it! There will be columns and sketches innumerable in the *Englishwoman*!"

"Miss Sharpley is here now."

"*In-deed!* But I thought she only drew the large centre pictures?"

"Exactly. The large centre picture is to represent the platform, with portraits of us all. She has drawn Mr. Westmorland and me, and now she wants a sitting of you I believe. Wait," she added to the coachman, "I shall want you to drive me to the Palace presently."

"A picture of me in the *Englishwoman*!" cried Miss Dinwiddie.

"Surely not the first time," humorously said Mr. Westmorland.

"Well! It's the first time I have been on the centre page," admitted she, all blushes.

"There is to be a sheet of sketches, of the hospital, laundry, etc.," said Mrs. Saxon.

"All England will be ringing with your name,

Miss Dinwiddie," protested Mr. Westmorland as they all three went indoors together.

The indefinite Miss Sharpley was found in the dining-room, sketch-book in hand, her scarcely tasted lunch beside her, rapidly making a telling little sketch of the pretty oriel widow, and Mrs. Saxon's amiable person in front of it.

"Dear, how clever!" cried Miss Dinwiddie, "and how delightful," she added, condescendingly, as she sat down, "to be able to get up so much enthusiasm in the provinces."

Mrs. Saxon indulged in a secret smile; this lady was, as her friend had said, a creation of her age. But she reflected what a good, solid, working basis lay under this appearance and manner, what an admirable secretary she was, how untiring, how accurate, and how much the league owed its welfare to her efforts. As for her dress, why, society has long held that anybody may wear anything, regardless of aught but his or her own inclination, and Mrs. Saxon was the last woman to dispute such a doctrine.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MAJOR'S ANNOUNCEMENT.

Because the very fiends weave ropes of sand
Rather than taste pure hell in idleness,
Therefore I kept my memory down by stress
Of daily work.

ROBERT BROWNING.

MRS. SAXON, as she sat at lunch, looked anxiously from time to time at Mr. Westmorland. Something in his appearance made her uneasy, a certain livid look about the complexion, and a most unaccustomed hesitancy of speech.

"I must have caught cold," he remarked once, "I feel such a stiffness in my left arm—I can scarcely raise it. Farren applied some embrocation this morning, but it has not afforded much relief."

"You must keep out of draughts," said Mrs. Saxon, authoritatively. "You should not have come and stood outside just now, in that biting wind; the Major will tell me I do not take care of you."

"Pooh! Evelyn labours under the idea that I am utterly senile and decrepit. I am much annoyed by the fuss he is always making."

Evidently his son's return had incensed him unusually; she had never heard him so venomous; and, feeling vexed with her old friend, she turned to Miss Dinwiddie, and the conversation flowed into health channels, ambulance lectures being the particular point in discussion.

In the midst of it all, Evelyn Westmorland walked quietly in. If his father had seemed to Mrs. Saxon to be looking ill, she thought so a thousand times more of himself. There was not a particle of colour in his face, and his eyes were hollow and dark; he looked fatigued to the point of exhaustion, so much so that she thought something must have happened, and half rose from her seat, but sat down again, checking the exclamation that rose to her lips, because she hated a commotion. He was at the last point of depression—wearied out with his tormenting, conflicting feelings, and, after a hurried greeting and apology to her for being late for lunch, he hastily left the room, and repaired to his own, to wash his hands and make himself presentable after his journey.

Could it all really be true, that nightmare-like drive with Disney? Had he really heard him laugh lightly, seen him smile a careless, happy smile, totally untinged by painful memory? and was it a fact that he cheerfully "owned the past was best," and admitted candidly that Hope Merriem was justified in dismissing him? It seemed to turn all Evelyn's world upside down. What had he done? What must Hope think

of him? No wonder she would not condescend to vindicate herself. The marvel was how he, Evelyn, could possibly have held such an erroneous opinion of Disney's character. Yet what a charming, taking fellow he was! Even to-day, with all his disapproval, with all his own unavailing, bitter regret, he yet must feel the spell of that handsome face, the glamour of those beautiful blue eyes.

After all, what had Disney's offence been? Barely enough flirtation to qualify him for a hero in the eyes of John Strange Winter. He had amused himself with a pretty girl whom he did not mean to marry, and the pretty girl in question had been foolish enough to take it to heart. For this—only this—was the woman to whom he was engaged to throw him over? Very tenderly does the world, and John Strange Winter as its prophet, judge such amiable weakness. Evelyn could recall one touching story from her pen, in which the hero, arising on the morning after a ball, hazily tries to remember how many times the night before he kissed a certain pretty little girl; he also counts the trophies he received from her—the roses and knots of ribbon, and the long glove, edged with real lace. In cheery mood, he proceeds to make a "holocaust" of this stolen property in the fireplace, and then goes for a walk, with a stainless conscience, and is rewarded by meeting another charming girl who gives him her entire devotion.

Mr. Ruskin tells us that he much admires the work of this author; somehow Major Westmorland did not. He was absolutely on the side of Hope Merrion. No woman could more severely condemn Disney's conduct than he did. No hope, no remedy for the poor girl who had mistaken the handsome young officer's intentions! Evelyn's heart swelled and choked within him: in his first fierce anger he told himself that no gentleman should associate with such a man: the utter thoughtlessness of his friend was unintelligible to him.

Nothing, nothing could alter the past: and, after

all, he had only himself to blame. For what purpose had God given him eyes, but to see and feel the nobility of Hope's nature? He ought to have seen it. Her light-hearted gaiety had partly misled him : his ponderous gravity could not realise the deep waters under that sparkling surface.

Oh, why—why—had things happened with such terrible perversity! Had he only delayed speaking to Leo for one day! . . .

He caught himself up hastily, with a contemptuous laugh. What would Hope have been likely to say to him? Was it likely that ever, under any circumstances, she would have loved him?

Ah, but he might have loved her, might have poured out his devotion at her feet, might have felt that his great love gave him a right to die for her.

How clear and sharp arose in his memory the vision of the small, white face and blazing eyes, with a background of lowering storm clouds! How there rang in his ears the echo of the voice which had cried, "*I hate you!*"

He was so glad to think that at least he had believed in her then; that was his only comfort. Though nothing whatever had occurred to vindicate her motives in his eyes, though the situation was the same in all points as at their first introduction, yet that day on the moors he had believed in her utterly. It was all past and done away with now. His walk in life lay before him mapped out clearly enough.

Leo had said she loved him, and all his future was implicitly hers. He meant to love her very much, to give his life up to making her happy; but he craved for a respite, time to go away and live down this agony of mind which the events of yesterday and to-day had engendered. Was it really yesterday only? What folly it seemed! Years might have lapsed since he asked pretty Leo to marry him.

He seemed snared and kept in on all sides. He *must* speak to his father now, he stood pledged to do so. How could he tell how cold an ocean of misery and

regret would roll over him on the drive through the innocent green lanes?

"You do look ill, sir," observed Farren, who, on hearing of the Major's arrival, had come to see if he was in want of anything.

"I got wet through yesterday, and am tired out : that's all," replied Evelyn.

"The master, he's not the thing to-day—no, not by any means," went on Farren.

"Not well?" sharply cried Evelyn.

"No, sir, he's not ; I am glad you've come back."

"You have been allowing him to take a chill!" said the son, wrathfully.

"I don't see how I'm to prevent master doing as he pleases, sir. He would stroll round the garden yesterday, after all that pouring rain, with Mrs. Saxon, looking at the tents——"

"Confound the tents!" was the irritable interruption. "What makes you think he isn't well?"

"He looks so bad, sir, and complains of stiffness in the limbs."

A sudden chill crept over Evelyn ; a strange idea visited him. Suppose that his father, that central pivot of his existence, and object of his present sacrifice, were to be taken away from him?

Such a thing was possible. If it happened, would he, Evelyn, have the moral courage to carry through his engagement? . . . Or perhaps the moral courage to break it off? Which course would be right? which the harder? He shrank from the hateful problem. The idea had merely flashed through his mind, but it seemed to reveal to him depths of unsuspected baseness in his own character. He delayed no more, but hurried downstairs at once to see how far Farren's account of his father was worthy of attention, his heart, the while, keenly reproaching him because, in his own dumb misery, he had barely glanced at Mr. Westmorland on walking into the dining-room—was, in fact, quite ignorant of how he looked.

The luncheon-party was just separating as he re-

appeared. He was introduced to the Misses Sharpley and Dinwiddie, to whom, as was his custom, he bowed without looking at them.

"So sorry," gushed Miss Dinwiddie to him, in most superfluous apology, "to be obliged to run away at once; but we shall meet at dinner, I hope, I am staying here until after the meeting."

"Indeed," said the Major, in his grimmest tones.

"The ladies' committee meets at three, and it is almost that now, so I know you will excuse us," said Mrs. Saxon to his father, as she passed his seat. "There, I see the Palace carriage driving up; Mrs. Dunster is arriving, mind you see that the Major eats something."

Evelyn's eye curiously followed Miss Dinwiddie's fluttering robes until they disappeared, and then he remarked, in tones of some horror,

"What a caution of a woman!"

"I believe you are not an admirer of the sex," sneered Mr. Westmorland. "I only wish you had a tenth part of Miss Dinwiddie's brains."

His son did not reply. He carried his plate to the sideboard, cut himself some cold meat, and sat down again. Then he turned a keen eye on the profile which fronted him. He thought that he certainly did look ill; and more than ill, aged and altered. A vague shock passed over him, an unexpressed horror which precipitated his action.

He ate a mouthful or two, then laid down his knife and fork, regarding wistfully the ivory-pale, cold, disdainful face.

At his movement, Mr. Westmorland turned round, bestowing on him a glance of cool contempt.

"Lost your appetite?" said he.

"Father, what have I done? Why do you look at me like that?" pleaded Evelyn, huskily.

"What do you mean?"

The Major rose, and came round the table.

"I had expected, I had hoped for a different reception," he said, appealingly. "I have tried to please

you, father. I came back to tell you so. I thought you would be glad."

"One thing would make me glad, Evelyn, and only one: to hear of your engagement."

"It is that," stammered Evelyn, hoarsely. "I did not write, I came to tell you so myself. I am engaged."

The changes that coursed over his father's expressive face were strange, almost terrifying, to see. He believed it at once; little as he knew Evelyn, he yet was sure that in these circumstances he would never jest.

The sudden, startling change—the transition from morbid gloom to frantic joy—the realization of what he had for years hopelessly longed for, was too much for him. He struggled to rise, clutching his son's arm, shoulder, neck, and leaning his weight upon him while he made distressing efforts to articulate. Evelyn's heart almost stopped.

"Father—dear father—what is it?" he cried.

"Who? Who? Her name?" screamed Mr. Westmorland, at last; but the scream was little more than a whisper.

"Her name? Miss Forde—Leo Forde," replied the bewildered Evelyn, his eyes fixed in dismay upon the now almost inanimate form in his arms.

"Father—father!" was again his helpless cry, as, his heart bitterly reproaching him for his clumsy way of announcing his tidings, he carefully lowered his burden into a chair. "Good God!" he gasped, as he looked into the face, an icy terror gripping his heart.

For an instant he recoiled, then sprang to the bell and rang it violently, convulsively; then darted back to the chair, flung himself on his knees beside it, and cried in vain to ears which did not hear.

The ladies' committee were settling the interesting and important question of what badges should be worn by the stewards. They had just reached the point of red rosettes when Mrs. Saxon, glancing up,

saw one of the grooms, mounted on a fast horse, dash past the window and disappear. She at once rang, and, without interrupting the business of the meeting, quietly asked the servant what was wrong.

"Mr. Westmorland has had a paralytic stroke, ma'am. The left side of his face is all drawn down—he looks awful, ma'am. The master, and the Major, and Farren, they've carried him upstairs."

"I should have been told at once," said Mrs. Saxon.

In a whisper she conveyed to Mrs. Dunster, the bishop's wife, the fact that she was wanted for a few minutes, and must depute the conduct of the meeting to her, then noiselessly left the room and went upstairs.

Leo Forde, in a clean white dress, stood at the drawing-room window in Minstergate, watching for the appearance of her lover and his father. At the piano sat Captain Disney, much at his ease, trying over the last new valse.

"By George, that would be a good one to dance to!" he cried, playing it softly over, and melodiously whistling the air as an accompaniment. "Do you dance, Miss Forde?"

"Whenever I get a chance," said conscientious Leo, with a smile.

"I should think so," laughed Dick, who was waiting at home to receive the Westmorlands; "she is the best dancer in Norchester."

"Ah! Pity Westmorland doesn't dance," said Disney, who had not yet quite recovered from the shock of hearing that Leo was engaged.

"Doesn't he?" asked Leo, disappointedly.

"You couldn't fancy him at it, could you? Too massive!" said Disney, laughing.

The girl drew herself up with the intention of resenting this small-impertinence; but the smiling face which the player turned to her, over his shoulder,

was so handsome and so playful that she could not resist it.

It was wonderful how quickly one became intimate with the Captain.

"Who was the lady up at the station, to-day, who glared at you so ferociously, Miss Forde?" he asked.

"Was there?" said Leo, ungrammatically. "I didn't see."

"A lady with a high colour and a gown to match."

"Mrs. Hancock!" cried Leo. "I did not see her! Are you sure?"

"Not sure that her name is Hancock, but sure that she had her eye on you. I had been watching her for some time; she came with a man who was a cross between a commercial traveller and a missionary, and saw him off by a train that left just as yours came in."

"Ah! That is her son! I am glad he is gone: he was dreadful. Oh, dear! dear! Talk of an angel," cried she, turning from the window in consternation, "here she comes, Dick! Yes, really! And she saw me in the window, so I can't say 'not at home.' Oh!" as the bell rang, "you will both stop and help me to bear it, *won't* you?"

A deep hush fell on the party, as a determined voice was heard in the passage, and in another moment Leo's neat little housemaid had announced, "Mrs. Hancock."

The lady rustled in, and, as Tom would have said, immediately "spotted" the Captain who had twirled round on his music-stool, and was lightly passing a cambric handkerchief over his golden moustache. Her eagle eye likewise noticed the cheerful fire which burned in the grate, and Leo's sumptuous rose posy, transferred to a crystal bowl on a small table in the window.

In some mysterious way, the extreme cosiness of these three young people annoyed her.

"So, Leonora, I have come to see if you have quite got the better of your accident," said she, deliberately seating herself.

"Are you speaking to me, Mrs. Hancock?" said Leo, innocently. "My name is not Leonora."

"What accident are you referring to, Mrs. Hancock?" asked Richard, affably.

"Well, I'm sure! Why, it's not more than three or four weeks since your sister was nearly burned to death," cried the lady, indignantly.

"Oh, Mrs. Hancock, indeed I wasn't!" said Leo, laughingly. "Let me introduce my brother's friend, Captain Disney."

Mrs. Hancock fixed her calculating eye upon him.

"I have seen you driving nasty, dangerous horses about the town," she remarked.

"I don't know about dangerous, they were most unquestionably nasty," smiled Edgar. "I should have supposed a town of this size would have raised a better turn-out; but I am happy to tell you that my own mare arrived to-day, and I trust she may meet with your approval."

"Were you staying at the 'Swan'?" she went on, still persistently staring at the warrior.

"I was, till my friend Forde came back; I think you may congratulate me on having now changed my quarters for the better."

"Ho!" said the lady, with a sniff, looking daggers at Leo. "Do you propose a long stay in Norchester, Captain Disney?"

"I expect I shall stay as long as Miss Forde will keep me. My friend Forde here is pretty sure he can get me permission to shoot the Hesselburgh coverts."

"I should not be at all surprised," said the lady, with ponderous sarcasm.

"Capital folks, the Saxons seem to be; they are a real blessing to the neighbourhood, I should think," went on Disney, chattily; he was enjoying himself

greatly. "You know them, of course?" he added, politely.

Mrs. Hancock fairly shook with fury.

"Mrs. Saxon is not on my visiting list," said she, with a voice and look whose acerbity is not to be described, "and I can moreover assure you, sir, that the family in question is *not* considered an addition by the old established families round Norchester."

"You surprise me," said the Captain, with an air of deep interest, "but I have always heard these out-of-the-way cathedral towns are extremely cliquy."

"You are no gentleman," said Mrs. Hancock, growing purple in the face, "to say such a thing of the town in which I was born."

"I can't help thinking I was justified," he answered, suavely. "You will remember that you have just, in Mr. Forde's house, made an insulting remark on the Saxons, whom you knew to be his friends; I merely followed your lead, and disparaged the town to which I believe you to be attached. I fancy we are quits."

"Dr. Forde, do you mean to suffer me to be treated in this way on a friendly visit to yourself?"

"Certainly not, madam," said Richard, with ponderous gravity. "I am sure, my friend will apologise; he must for the moment have forgotten that custom bestows on ladies the monopoly of making personal remarks."

"I make my apologies, through you, Mrs. Hancock, to the entire town of Norchester," said Disney at once, rising and bowing to her; "and now may I entreat you to overlook this slight unpleasantness, and give me an account of Miss Forde's accident, of which I have never heard a word."

The expression of Mrs. Hancock's eyes was still sufficiently malign to have daunted all Norchester, save and except the unregenerate three then present. Disney had made an enemy—a thing he rarely did. From that moment she sought opportunity to injure

him. She knew that he had made fun of her, but she was uncertain to what extent ; it was this uncertainty, as to exactly how ridiculous she appeared in his eyes, which caused her to dislike him, as, vaguely, she had always disliked Leo.

"I am glad I had the courage to speak up," she subsequently remarked, when detailing his outrageous behaviour to Mrs. Shorthouse. "Anybody may know *my* opinion of the Saxons! Of course the Fordes think themselves everything just because they know them, but I can tell them pride goes before a fall! I call this Health Mummery downright disgusting, and a disgrace to the town. Have you glanced at any of the pamphlets circulated by this Sanitary League? To put it mildly, they are most indelicate. I was obliged to lay them all on one side when Sayers was at home: one was about *tight lacing*, if you will believe me, and actually contained a drawing of—but I will not shock you with details."

"Dear Mrs. Hancock, you surprise me ; I thought the League was doing so much good ; and my husband is to address the meeting," answered the Canon's wife, who had become strangely half-hearted in her allegiance, ever since the Hesselburgh dinner-party. "The Canon agrees with the Bishop that we must march with the times, and he considers Mrs. Saxon a very able woman, though peculiar—peculiar, I grant you !"

"Oh, the whole town may turn round if it likes, and fall down and worship Mrs. Saxon, red hair, billycock, and all," said Mrs. Hancock, icily. "I am one who holds to her own opinion, and I repeat, I am glad I said what I did, and where I did, and I don't care if all Norchester knows it ;" and she assumed the air of one who feels that the eyes of the world are upon her. This, of course, was after her morning call at Minstergate ; and it was destined to come to a very abrupt conclusion.

A ring had been heard, coupled with a knock at the door, and Leo's cheeks had crimsoned in anticipa-

tion of the entrance of Major Westmorland. Instead of that, the housemaid appeared, and said to Dick,

"You're wanted at once, sir."

He hastily went out, and returned in a very few moments, saying decidedly,

"Mrs. Hancock, I am afraid we must deny ourselves the pleasure of a longer visit this afternoon. I want to speak to my sister on a matter of importance."

"Most sorry to have intruded," said the lady, caustically, as she rose in a tremor of indignation. To be literally turned out, without any tea being offered to her, and just at the moment when something of great interest was manifestly going forward!

"What can you expect?" she reflected. "Boy and girl like that, setting up housekeeping? They don't know how to behave themselves, of course. That insolent young man has no right to be staying there without a chaperon. Certainly Richard Forde is bent on making a match for his sister. If they don't catch the Major, they will have the Captain."

The said Captain accompanied the guest downstairs, and did not hasten his return: but in a very short time Dick came hurrying down, his hat in his hand.

"Off to Hesselburgh," he explained, "Westmorland *père* has had a stroke. Very unlucky for poor little Leo,—cheer her up, he is sure to get on all right; tell her I'll bring the Major back with me."

CHAPTER XXXII.

HOPE'S MISSION.

Never any more,
While I live,
Need I hope to see his face
As before.

R. BROWNING.

“Dalby Sands,
“Saturday night.

“MY DEAR MISS MERRION,

“I do hope you'll forgive my intruding upon your attention, but I feel sure I ought to write to you about Guy—perhaps you may have heard from Mrs. Merrion, and so know her address, and be able to send this on to her. When she left, Guy was far from well, but she thought me over anxious, and refused to have a doctor.

“The journey from Eastbourne here, made him much worse, and the most unsatisfactory thing is, that Mr. Humbey, the doctor here, for whom I sent at once on our arrival, does not know what is the matter with him, though he thinks seriously of the case. He wishes to have another opinion, and Mrs. Merrion is so very particular, I am really afraid to telegraph to London on my own responsibility. To-day Wilfred also seemed unwell, and, at my wits' end, I write to beg you to send a telegram authorising me to send for Dr. Rankin Gardner, and also, if possible, let me know Mrs. Merrion's address. She promised to send it at once on arriving, but they have been gone a week, and I have not heard. I hope this is intelligible; I am so disturbed, I scarcely know what

I write. You are always so kind, I turn instinctively to you in my trouble.

“I am

“Most sincerely yours,

“MABEL THORPE.”

Hope began to read this letter listlessly.

It was two days since her accident. The first she had spent in bed, to-day she was up and dressed, but still on the sofa in her room.

She was very little the worse, it seemed, for her mischance. The day in bed had taken away the pains in her limbs, and though still stiff, and with one cheek much discoloured by a bad bruise, she was whole and sound, and had not even a cold. In fact, she had been obliged to plead more fatigue than she felt, as an excuse for remaining upstairs: to go down and face Gilbert Greville and Tom had been, for some occult reason, impossible. She felt that her own room was her only refuge, until she left Leaming, which she intended to do as soon as she could.

She had yesterday despatched a letter to Ireland, begging Lady Caroline Loftus to let her come to her on a long visit; but Mable Thorpe's letter cut the knot of her difficulties at once.

In the desolation of her heart, it was sweet, with a sweetness hard to analyse, to feel that somebody wanted her, and was sending for her. Miss Merrion, the heiress, rich and admired, felt strangely friendless and forsaken.

True, there was Gilbert Greville downstairs, awaiting only her word: ready, at her slightest signal, to give her everything he had, or was. Ah, but what a vast return he expected to such seeming generosity! He would want no less than herself, body and soul. She could not give him that. Why not? She did not know—only she felt that it was impossible.

She was really far more exhausted than she herself guessed. Some strange excitement was possessing her, and giving her a fictitious energy.

She had scarcely slept at all, since she left the huts of the charcoal-burners: it seemed to her that she no longer needed sleep—as if the only thing worth doing were to live over and over again in thought the incidents of the last few days; and all the time she seriously told herself that she was doing her best to forget it all.

This letter, mercifully for her, gave a new turn to her thoughts, and drew them from herself. Here was work for her—here was a direct call.

As soon as she had grasped the sense of it, she rang the bell for her maid: as she did so, her eye fell on the date of the letter, and to her horror she found that it was three days back. Glancing at the address, she saw that it had been sent to Hesselburgh and forwarded thence.

“Ask Mr. Lyster if he will be so extremely kind as to come up here and see me,” cried she, when her summons was answered,

Mollie came at once, laden with grapes and peaches.

“My dear, I am so pleased you are looking so well!” he cried, affectionately.

“Oh, yes, Mollie, I am quite well—quite! And I have had such a letter! My brother’s children are so ill, and my sister-in-law has gone off abroad leaving them with a young governess, and I must go to them at once! Is there a train to London I could catch to-day?”

“My dear! Train! London! To-day!” he cried.

“Oh, Mollie, I must! Indeed I must! See here! She asks me to telegraph, and I ought to have had the letter yesterday! She will think I am as heartless and unfeeling as the rest! She will not know what to do!”

Mollie took the letter from her, and mastered its contents.

“You are not fit to travel, dear,” he said at last.

“I shall fret myself into a fever if I am not doing something at once! Indeed I shall! Poor Guy! He is such a darling!”

"Here comes Muriel—let us hear her," said Mollie, as Miss Saxon walked in.

"I know she will judge as I do!" cried Hope, eagerly. "And I am quite well—what is the matter with me? I have no disease! The worst that could befall would be a little fatigue, and Bowen is with me to take care of me!" She was working herself up into a state of great excitement.

"I will go and get Bradshaw," said Mollie, meekly.

"I have just had a telegram from mother," said Muriel, as soon as they were alone, "saying we are to go back directly, to help her over this horrid Sanitary League. I suppose you won't come, because of Captain Disney?"

"Certainly not; I could not possibly!" cried poor Hope, the crimson flaming into her small; pale face. "Not for anything could I go to Hesselburgh now, Murie! And of course I can't stay here without you, so that settles it."

"I could easily telegraph the *mater* that you were bad, and that I could not leave you——"

"Oh, that would be nonsense! I am not ill."

She sprang up and walked about the room.

"Ill! No such thing," she cried; "and, besides, I am in such a state of mind about Guy."

"I should think," slowly pronounced Muriel, "that perhaps you had better go."

"There is no question about it—I must," again cried Hope. "Oh, Murie, Murie! I have made such a mess of things in general. I told you once, at Hesselburgh, that I did not want to die. I—believe—I—half think—I have changed my mind!"

"What nonsense, Hope! If you talk like that, I shall really think you ought not to travel."

Hope was silent, leaning her flushed cheek against her sofa-pillow.

Mollie re-entered.

"There is a train at half-past two," he said, "which will get you to London at eight o'clock. Change at Brereley, of course. You will have to sleep at the

Great Northern Hotel, and go to Dalby next morning."

"Why not to-night?"

"The only train you could catch would be such a late one. You see, you must drive from King's Cross to Victoria, and you could not get anything earlier than the 9.40. You would not be there before midnight."

"I must see," said Hope, hurriedly, "about that. Perhaps it would be better not to keep them up. But oh! I shall be so impatient until I am there."

"You must bestir yourself with your packing," he said, "for you ought to start in an hour and a quarter from now. Hey, Muriel, do you think it prudent?"

"I think perhaps, on the whole, she had better go, Mollie. Of course she must have a carriage to herself, and then she can lie down all the way: and Bowen is very good and clever at travelling."

"You will not be able to take leave of Tom and Greville, they are shooting," said Mollie.

"It cannot be helped," replied Hope, heaving an inward sigh of relief.

"Well, I had better order the carriage and an early luncheon," said Mollie; "but in my opinion you had better not go, my dear."

He might as well have told the cutting, chill wind outside that, in his opinion, it ought not to blow. Hope was quite determined. He left them to make all necessary preparations.

Muriel put Hope on the sofa, sternly forbidding any exertion, and Bowen and she, in three quarters of an hour, had finished everything. Then, when she had despatched the maid to have some dinner, Muriel asked, with an odd little smile,

"What am I to say to Mr. Greville when you are gone?"

"Oh, I don't know! Anything you like that will prevent his following me! These unattached men are dreadful—they can follow you about from place to place."

Muriel sat down on the sofa beside her friend, placing her arm round her—a most rare manifestation of attachment on her part.

“Hope,” said she, in her soft, even way, “is that quite genuine? Don’t you care for him? Or is it that you are upset, and not very well, and would like things to stand over for a little?”

There was a silence before Hope answered; then her voice was quite firm and decided.

“I think I shall never marry him, Murie. Certainly not for years and years to come. I will not be so unwise as to take vows of celibacy: at the present moment it seems impossible that I should marry: I know that just now my feelings are exaggerated; but I have a deep conviction that months hence, when I have settled down again, I shall feel the same as regards marriage with any one.”

She paused: Muriel, feeling that more was to come, said nothing, but drew her a little closer.

“I was wrong to engage myself to Mr. Disney,” said Hope, continuing, “but I almost think I have been punished enough.” . . . A gathering emotion made her hesitate, to steady her voice. “You must not think,” said she then, “anything that is—that is sentimental, or—or—foolish, if I say something.”

“I shall understand,” said Muriel, simply.

“It is hard to say, but it amounts to this. He . . . Major Westmorland”—she spoke the name firmly—“is a man whose judgment I respect. He is a man with a lofty ideal: not like—other people. I should have been proud of his good opinion, glad to think that he liked me. Because of that Disney affair—he despised me. To be despised is worse than to be hated—Browning says so—oh! many degrees worse! . . . Ah, well!” she rose, and went to the dressing-table, “it is over now; but somehow I feel quite different,”—she looked round as if even the room she stood in had altered its aspect in her eyes. “It is hard to understand what can have happened exactly to change me so; there does not seem reason enough,

does there? I cannot quite unravel it ; but, Muriel, I *am* changed."

"Yes," said Muriel, "you are ;" and her eyes had tears in them.

"After I broke it off with Edgar," went on Hope, reflectively, "I was very unhappy. But I knew I had made a mistake, and I looked forward to getting over it, enjoying life again, having all my pleasures as I used to do. Now . . . it is all quite different : I feel so beaten down——"

She stopped very suddenly, standing still, with her hands wrung together, and Muriel feared she was going to break down. However, she recovered herself, in a grave, patient manner which was heroic in its way, and, after a very short silence, added, in her usual voice,

"And so I believe it must be time to leave off thinking about myself, and give my mind to other people : the children, for instance."

"Yes," replied Muriel, tenderly, "I am glad you are going to the children."

Crossing the room to her side, Hope bent down and kissed her.

"You are good to me," she said.

"I love you," replied Muriel, quietly.

"Well," said Hope, after a short interval, "I suppose we ought to go downstairs."

"Yes." Muriel rose, and furtively wiped away a couple of tears. "Mind you write to me, Hope ; we all go to Scotland the day after this Sanitary League function."

Hope gave the required promise ; and, as they were descending the staircase together, Muriel remarked,

"I think, on the whole, it will not be wise to raise Mr. Greville's hopes too high."

A drizzle of rain set in as Mr. Lyster and Muriel, with their young guest, seated themselves in the brougham.

"The sky is shedding tears," said Muriel, "because

our nice party is broken up and gone. I wonder how they all got on yesterday, and what Mr. Westmorland will think of the match!"

"Muriel," said Mollie, gravely, "in my humble opinion that's a pity, and though I hope I am not inhospitable, I must confess I am sorry I invited Miss Forde here, sorry it should have happened under my roof. She is too young. In my opinion, marriage is for men and women, not for girls and boys, who never stop to consider their responsibilities. I must say I am disappointed in Major Westmorland, I thought he had more sense."

Muriel hesitated how to answer him; for she guessed that the subject was painful to Hope. At last she said,

"I have no doubt he will make her happy. I only wonder if she will do the same for him. She does not understand him in the very least."

Hope nerved herself to make a remark.

"There is a wonderful kind of intuition," said she, "which in a case of love seems almost to take the place of reason in a woman: she does and says what pleases, hardly knowing that she does so; and the man is just as well satisfied."

"Some men," said Muriel, "perhaps. But I have noticed that, in cases where a man, a maturely developed man like the Major, marries a pretty little girl, they seem to fall apart so much afterwards. You remember the Melton marriage, Mollie."

"Yes," said Mr. Lyster, thoughtfully, "but it is hard to define a limit of age exactly. Now you, Murie, are only a year or so older than Leone Forde. But you have been taught to think; your mother has encouraged you to exercise your judgment. I am certain that, if you accepted a man, it would be because he was your deliberate choice; with that pretty child, I cannot help feeling that it is merely a case of her first offer."

"Oh, most probably," said Muriel; she could not add her own deliberate conviction that, not only was

the Major not in love with Leone, but that he was in love with some one else.

Mollie rubbed his forehead with his pocket-handkerchief, a thing he frequently did when bothered ; then he bestirred himself, and cried, cheerily,

"Come, let us change the subject. We must not send off our Hope in bad spirits. I daresay it will all come right. We must not be depressed, or we shall despatch her in a melancholy frame of mind, which will never do, with such a long journey before her. I hope you will find the patient much better, my dear child. What a comfort to the young governess to have you with her ! A charming letter she writes, I think she must be a nice girl."

"I admire her as sincerely as any girl I know," replied Hope ; and then, partly to make conversation, and partly because the subject filled her with a real sympathy, and she knew the kind-heartedness of her listener, she told the story of Mabel Thorpe's love affair, and of her patient courage.

Hope could be eloquent when she pleased ; an eloquence, perhaps, more of eye and voice than of tongue. Mr. Lyster fastened upon the story with keenly awakened interest.

"Dear, dear !" he said, when it was finished, "now, can't we do something here ? Is there nothing to be done to help them ? Poor young things ! what a touching story !"

He was lost in thought for a few minutes, and Hope recalled Mr. Greville's suggestion that she should apply to Major Westmorland.

"I have an idea, Hope," suddenly said Mollie. "It is not very brilliant, but still it is an idea and it is this. As you remarked last Sunday, poor old Mr. Wetherell is failing terribly. I have promised him a curate before winter, for he is quite unequal to getting about in the bad weather ; he has never been himself since Nellie's death ;" and the kind little man sighed.

"Now, my idea," he went on, "was that the curate should rent the little stone cottage in the park,

with the roses on the porch. But now the thought simmering in my brain is this : suppose I gave Arthur Strange the cottage, rent free, and two hundred and fifty pounds a year, do you think the young couple would marry on that if he had the promise of the living when poor old Wetherell goes ?”

Hope cried out with pleasure and astonishment.

“It wouldn’t do if he is an ambitious man,” said Mollie, thoughtfully, “for the place is—you see what it is, even in summer, and it is terribly lonely in winter. But the air is fine, the work is light, and that is a pretty cottage, my dear. A good garden, and pasture to keep a cow, if they liked. The living is worth four hundred and fifty pounds—which is large, you know, for such a small village.”

“They would think it Paradise !” cried Hope, her face aglow, her hands clasped.

“We mustn’t be too precipitate,” said Mollie, “I must see Wetherell first, for I must not foist upon him a curate he does not take to. But he will be sure to sympathise with a governess : poor Nellie was a governess, you know ! Then, the thing to do will be to get young Strange down here and have a talk with him. Do you know his address ?”

“Yes—oh, yes !”

“Well then, Hope, you write it down here for me, and I will communicate with him direct. Don’t say a word about it to the poor girl, in case it can’t be arranged after all. I will write to you as soon as anything is settled, you know.”

Hope was quite overcome.

“Mollie,” she said, unsteadily, “if this can be done it will be, I think, the greatest kindness you ever did in your life. If I am the means, even so indirectly, of helping Mabel Thorpe, I shall feel that I have not lived utterly for myself—that there does exist one human being who has been helped through me !”

CHAPTER XXXIII.

I FEEL AS IF I SHOULD BE GLAD TO DIE.

God answers some prayers sharp and suddenly,
And thrusts the thing we have prayed for in our face,
A gauntlet with a gift in't ; every wish
Is like a prayer with God. *Aurora Leigh.*

"AM I to give her this?" asked the neatly-attired hospital-nurse, placing a telegram in the hands of Dr. Humbey.

He took it with knit brows, and read :

"Send at once for physician, nurses, anything you require. Shall be with you to-night about eleven.—Hope Merrion."

"Is that the mother?" he asked.

"I think not. Little Adeline says it is her aunt. If she is an experienced person it would be a great relief to have her."

The doctor looked perplexed,

"Suppose she has never had it?" he suggested ;
"she ought not to come into the house until we know."

"How will you stop her? There is no address to this. Handed in at the Leaming Road office. Have you the least idea where Leaming Road is?"

Dr. Humbey shook his head, adding.

"If I had, it would not be much use, for Mrs. or Miss Merrion has, in all probability, left there by now."

"Well, I must go back to my patient," replied Nurse White. "I leave you to do as you think best about it, but I shall not rouse Miss Thorpe to speak to her upon the subject; if she asks any question, then I shall tell her."

"That will be the best way. I will be here to-night, meet this lady at the door, and explain the circumstances."

It was nearly half-past eleven that night, before the station fly, containing Hope, her maid, and her luggage, drove up to Sea View Parade.

The long journey had naturally tired her, but she was not as worn out as Bowen expected she would be. The idea of coming to the children, of being of use, was keeping her up.

Directly the fly stopped, the door opened, and an elderly gentleman appeared on the threshold, came out, and approached the window, where Hope looked eagerly forth.

"Dear me!" exclaimed he, in irrepressible surprise at her youthful appearance. "Are you Miss Merri-
on?"

"Yes, yes! And you? The doctor? Oh, is he very ill?" cried she, in great agitation.

He looked pityingly at her.

"I must not let you come into the house, indeed," he said. "It is scarlet fever."

"Oh, miss!" cried Bowen clutching her from behind, as if to keep her from rushing into infection.

"Scarlet fever!" cried Hope. "Oh, but that does not matter! I have had it! Poor little boy, how is he?"

"I hope out of danger now; but Wilfred has it, and Miss Thorpe is quite prostrated."

"Miss Thorpe!"

"She sickened two days ago, but would not give in until we thought Guy was safe. I have been obliged, in the absence of any orders, to take a good deal upon myself. I telegraphed last night for a nurse."

"That was right," faintly said Hope, feeling overwhelmed. "I am very grateful. Now Bowen and I can help. Bowen is a very good nurse. Is there room for us?"

"In the house? Oh, yes. The other lodgers of

course decamped, when they heard what it was——”

“But Miss Merrion!” cried Bowen, “are you sure you have had the fever?”

“Yes, quite sure,” repeated Hope, vehemently. “All children have it, of course I had it. Let me come in at once; and please see to the luggage, Bowen. Has nothing been heard from Mrs. Merrion?” she asked, as she hastened into the house.

“Miss Merrion, are you quite sure you do right to come here?” said the doctor.

“Why, certainly,” she cried, “I must come! What a wretch I should be to go away and leave them! Besides, I don’t want to knock up the hotel people at this unearthly hour. I am afraid it is very inconvenient and very thoughtless of me to arrive at such a time—so late; but as I telegraphed I hoped they would have prepared. I never dreamed that Miss Thorpe would be ill.”

“Poor girl, she was so worn out with anxiety and nursing that I am afraid it will go hard with her,” said Dr. Humbey, pityingly with an admiring gaze at the new arrival, as she sank into an arm-chair and pulled off her gloves.

He then proceeded to give an outline of events.

Guy’s illness had been what is known among doctors as suppressed scarlet fever, that is to say, scarlet fever without the usual accompaniments of sore throat and red rash. Had any practised doctor seen him when he was first ill, he would have known what it must be; but Dr. Humbey, who did not see him until his railway journey had given him a chill and he was suffering from congested lungs, was uncertain, though, from what he was told, he guessed accurately what complaint he had to deal with.

Before the arrival of the London physician, the doctor’s conclusion had been proved by the sickening of Wilfred, with all the recognised symptoms. The whole of the day after Mabel Thorpe despatched her imploring letter to Hope, Guy had lain at the gate of death. The responsibility had been terrible. Nobody

knew how to communicate with any of the child's relations. Late at night, his delirious ravings, growing gradually feebler, subsided into stupor, and this stupor, by-and-by changing its character, seemed to become a natural sleep.

All through the night, with every nerve strained, Miss Thorpe watched for his waking—the waking on which hung life or death. But still the child slept on, and was sleeping when Dr. Humbey came after breakfast. He sat down by the bed and watched too, and at about eleven Guy stirred.

“It was pitiful to see that girl's face,” said the doctor. “Some women have the mother instinct so strong in them—if it had been her own boy, she could scarcely have felt it more. I had told her that, if he was sensible when he woke, he would in all probability pull through. So he tossed about a bit, and opened those great eyes of his, and he saw Torpie, as they call her, standing by the bed. He looked reflectively at her, a bit of a thing, with the breath almost out of his body, and an expression in his eyes as if he were half in heaven already; and, ‘I say, Torpie dear,’ says he, as cool as you please, ‘I hope my crab's not dead?’ The revulsion of feeling was too much for her. His green, sandy crab, that he kept in a bucket of salt water! I had seen her crying her heart out over the rubbish the night before as she fed it; everything the little scamp had touched seemed sacred. To hear him calling out for it as if nothing had happened was more than she could bear. She just managed to gasp out, ‘It's alive—I'll bring it;’ then away she ran, and fell like a stone on the landing. I picked her up, made her go to bed, and sent for Nurse White. She's the right kind of woman, and no mistake.”

“Is she very ill?” asked Hope.

“I am afraid so,” he replied, reluctantly.

“The first thing I must do,” said she, “is to let her mother know.”

“Certainly, her mother should be told. She need

not come—at present. But warn her to be ready in case of a summons.”

“Oh!” cried Hope, “is it as bad as that? What can my sister be about to send no address? Why, all her children might be burned to death, and she would not know it! She has been gone more than a week. However, she would be no use here. She is better away, after all.”

Bowen here entered the room.

“If you please, miss, I have taken a cup of soup to your room, and you must go to bed at once, as I am sure the doctor would tell you, if you wish to be of any use to-morrow.”

Hope rose.

“I will go: I will do whatever you tell me, so that you allow me to think I am being of use,” cried she.

And so engrossing was this new atmosphere of anxiety and care in which she found herself, that her own thoughts and her own sorrows sank away into insignificance, and that night, for the first time since Evelyn refused to take her hand, she slept soundly.

The next few days were indeed full ones for her. Into them so many emotions crowded that life seemed to her a different, a deeper thing than she had ever believed it. It was a life of complete isolation, for they knew nobody in Dalby Sands. Moreover, whatever acquaintance they might have had there, would of course have shunned the stricken house. On consideration, Hope had decided not to say anything of the scarlet fever to her friends at Hesselburgh, partly because she knew that infection may be conveyed in a letter. She merely telegraphed the news of her safe arrival, and Muriel was, during the next few days, so busy with the Women's Sanitary League that she had no time to write; and, when that was over, the Saxons went to their father's relations in Scotland, and Evelyn took his paralysed father home to Feverell Chase.

The very day after Hope's arrival, came a short

note from Bertha. They were having a very enjoyable trip, said she, writing from Nürnberg. For the next week their movements would be uncertain—they would be in small villages in the Bavarian Tyrol, but, a week hence, letters would find them at Salzburg.

Hope immediately telegraphed to Nürnberg, but the Merrions had left before the message arrived, and they did not receive it. She was obliged to content herself with writing a letter to her sister-in-law, couched in no measured terms: a letter which Mrs. Frederic Merrion never either forgot or forgave.

As little Adeline had been so long exposed to the infection before the danger was discovered, the doctor, believing that she must certainly take the fever, did not send her away, but kept her isolated from the others, with her nurse to look after her, and so far she had not sickened.

Still, the three separate sick-rooms entailed a large amount of care and nursing; for Guy, as yet, was too weak to bear the clamour of Wilfred, who had taken the complaint in its mildest form, and required a firm hand to keep him in bed. The nursery-maid, who had had scarlet fever only a few years back, and so was not afraid of it, found herself quite unable to cope with him. Bowen, however, ruled him with a rod of iron, so deputing to Hope the, at present, comparatively easy task of sitting by Guy's bed, and leaving Nurse White free to devote all her attention to Miss Thorpe, who was seriously ill.

Bowen was a cool, practical woman, with an eye to the main chance; her one redeeming tenderness was her devotion to her mistress. Hope was of that fast disappearing class of people who possess the art of attaching to themselves all those of a lower order with whom they come in contact. Bowen's last mistress had often reflected how rich her maid must be growing on her perquisites: this very same maid would not have stolen a shoe-lace from Hope; in her service she would cheerfully undertake what in

another situation she would have flatly declined to attempt. It was Hope who had got Bowen's consumptive niece into the Ventnor hospital, and obtained for her brother that excellent place as groom. Hope knew about, and sympathised with, all the private hopes and fears of the reserved woman, and never forgot to ask after the delicate sister-in-law, or the progress of the young niece for whose dressmaking apprenticeship her maid was paying. Consequently, she was waited upon, hand and foot, and now was suffered to feel no slightest inconvenience from the rudimentary nature of lodging-house cookery, nor the scantiness of lodging-house jugs of tepid water, for purposes of ablution.

Bowen was greatly astonished, the first day of their stay at Sea View Parade, to find how energetic and well Miss Merrion seemed; she did not make allowance for the stimulus of this new excitement. On that day, Mabel Thorpe seemed stronger, and, on her asking whether any news had been heard from Mrs. Merrion, was told that Miss Merrion had come. She was at first distressed, murmuring that Miss Merrion would take the fever, but after a while seemed relieved, and asked to see her.

Her inquiries were all for the children, and she passed lightly over her illness, only saying miserably that it was very unfortunate that she should be useless at such a time, but that she meant soon to be well again. She asked if her mother knew of her illness and begged earnestly that nothing might be said to alarm her, as the journey was so long and so expensive.

"I shall be much easier about Guy and Wilf now that you are here," she said. "But mind you do not overdo it. I don't think you look at all well."

"Oh—I am well! Don't fear for me," Hope answered, brightly.

The next day Mabel Thorpe was worse; on the morning of the next the doctor telegraphed for her mother.

Hope sat with her the afternoon of this day, while Nurse White got some sleep. The girl was delirious, though not violently so. She knew no one, but was quiet for the most part; when she spoke, it was to address Arthur Strange, whom she imagined to be present, or to say a prayer.

A nature so high and so strong was revealed, both in her prayers and in what she said to the man she loved, that the listening Hope hung her head in deep humiliation. When she thought of this girl's life of self-sacrifice, of the purity and nobleness of her attachment, her own life seemed so gay and trivial, her brief engagement such a mockery of what love really is. The silent tears rolled down her cheeks at the faint accents of the brave voice, repeating the words with which no doubt she had often, both by letter and by voice, cheered the drooping hopes of her betrothed.

"They also serve, who only stand and wait," she said, over and over again. "It is the waiting which is the hard part, isn't it, dearest? And it has been a long time It is hard to see each other so seldom but we are young and strong, and think how much happier we are than if we had never known each other;" and then sharply, with an indescribable pang in her voice, "Oh, Arthur, I can't bear to see you cry!"

Hope, hiding her face, felt as if she ought not to enter into this Holy of Holies. Her heart was torn for thinking of the many, many English girls whose lives resembled that of Mabel. This hopeless poverty, this iron fate which made a strong man weep, how bitterly sad a thing it was.

Hope felt as if she loathed herself, as if her own luxurious existence and easily gratified desires were an insult to the girl by whose bedside she sat.

What if Mabel should die—should perish at her post for the sake of these children, and leave her Arthur desolate?

"She would be more sincerely mourned than I

should," bitterly thought Hope. "Of what use am I in this world? and the only good man I know despises me. It would be better for me to die, and for her to live, and then Mollie could help Arthur Strange, and they would marry, and ah! how happy they would be! But what use is it to think of such a thing? The fever would not accept me as a substitute. If it would, I feel as if I should be glad to die—to give my useless life for her precious one!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE MAJOR'S MOTIVE.

I swear I do not love him. Did I, once?

.....Did I indeed

Love once: or did I only worship? Yes,

Perhaps, O friend, I set you up so high

I haply set you above love itself,

And out of reach of these poor woman's arms.

E. B. BROWNING.

AFTER all, sunshine did smile on the monster meeting of the Women's Sanitary League. A cold, autumnal sunshine, frosty in its character, and accompanied by a somewhat boisterous breeze, but still sunshine, which animated the scene, and danced on the tossing flags which surmounted the tents.

The whole of Norchester was there. Not one of the minster clergy was absent, from the bishop himself, roguish and genial, dishevelled as to his hair, and secular as to his attire, to the most minor of the minor canons, a young man fresh from Cambridge, with a rooted belief that music in church and plenty of it, was the foundation of the Catholic religion, and that his own tenor voice was the finest in England.

There were the county people, exceedingly dowdy

for the most part, but fairly intelligent, and approving the entertainment as a whole, except when they found some new, money-made family seated in a more convenient or prominent position than themselves at one of the lectures. There was the army of ladies of whom Mrs. Hancock was more or less typical, who, never having attended such a meeting before, were all sure it must be wrong, but were present in order to be shocked at the depravity of the generation; there were the personal friends of the Saxons, differing widely as to type, some being fashionable, some scientific, many given over wholly and utterly to fads. Several stars of the Royal Institution were among them, discussing technical matters concerning household sanitation, and reason as applied to dress, in a manner which seemed utterly shameless to the Hancock faction, who would have liked to put a shawl over the beautiful copy of the Milo Venus which Mrs. Saxon had arranged in a bower of roses just before the platform.

The bishop opened the proceedings in the gayest possible manner, putting every one in a good humour to start with, and going on to enforce his point with several choice and carefully selected anecdotes which so charmed the people that, by the time his melodious voice ceased, most of the audience were feeling that Norchester was painfully behind the age, and that it was high time that such a movement was set on foot, before the other towns of England discovered its deficiencies: for the bishop seemed to think that, if only his diocese would condescend to try, it could easily distance any other diocese in the matter of health, or of anything else; so of course an effort was worth while, if only to show other people how to do the thing properly.

Dr. Compton, of the London Health League, followed the bishop, with a fierce torrent of Irish rhetoric. He frightened his hearers out of their wits by the awful vividness of his details. Vaguely they all wondered how anybody ever managed to be born,

much less to arrive at maturity, during the preceding centuries, in face of the ghastly tissue of horrors now brought to their notice. Ignorant nurses, ignorant doctors, foetid air, and malarial water, poisonous food, murderous clothing, and a mode of living which rendered life impossible, seemed to have surrounded these unhappy generations from their birth. Would those listening to the speaker allow their children to suffer so? Would they not at once insist on their discarding their under-linen, wearing boots too large for them, abjuring pastry, subscribing to the League, and taking other methods to ensure their physical salvation, whence, as a matter of course, must result their spiritual salvation also?

Just as the nervous audience were fancying that the Black Death must be hovering over Norchester, and that noxious exhalations were rising from the very ground beneath them, the orator, having made his point, abruptly ceased, and the chairman announced that an hour would elapse before the next speaker began, which time their host and hostess hoped they would spend in partaking of refreshments and inspecting the exhibits.

Accordingly, a general move was made, and, after a little crushing, people found themselves once more in the open air, where a perfect Babel of voices broke out; conspicuous among which were the accents of a wild-looking German doctor, who had come to England with the special object of preaching his new health gospel, namely, the terrible danger of feeding babies on milk. Water, he had discovered, was their only natural diet. As he could not speak a word of English a great deal of his eloquence was lost. He ran from group to group, piteously asking if nobody spoke Deutsch.

"I feel convinced that I am all over germs," whispered Disney to Leo Forde, as they emerged together into the sunshine. "My flesh positively creeps, and I dare not breathe for fear of imbibing poison. Shall we venture on a cup of tea? Have

you courage? I think, as it is Mrs. Saxon's *menage*, we may feel tolerably certain that the water has been filtered, the milk tested, the tea poured away from the leaves, and the cream not artificially preserved. But think it over calmly! Think what risks we run every time we drink a cup of tea! I am sure it is a wonder that any of us are alive to tell the tale."

"I don't like it; it makes me feel rather sick," said Leo, languidly. "It is all very well for sanitary inspectors to understand this kind of thing, but I don't see why we should have it crammed down our throats."

"A feature of the age," replied Disney, easily. "Everybody ought to know everything, that's the theory. I can't undertake to say whether it is right or wrong. Let us go and forget our cares in the refreshment-room; fortunately Mrs. Saxon's ideas of hygiene don't seem to have got so far as zoe-done!"

"Wait a moment, please," said the girl, pausing, with a sudden change sweeping over her face. "I see Evelyn, he is looking for me."

"What!" said Disney, "has the poor fellow actually got leave of absence from the sick-room to come and mingle with the festive throng for five minutes? Jove, what a martyrdom that man's life is. I wonder why he submits to it?"

"I think he likes it," said Evelyn's betrothed, with a touch of bitterness which did not escape her hearer; "he cares more for his father than for any one else, I believe."

As she spoke, Westmorland, who had been looking round in a wistful way, caught sight of her, and began threading his way through the crowd towards her.

Disney fell back a step or two, curiously scanning the faces of both.

Leone was looking splendid. She was well-dressed, for this was her first appearance in public as the promised wife of the heir of Feverell Chase. Scarcely

a soul in the great marquee but had been watching her as she sat between her brother and her brother's friend ; scarcely a soul but had remarked that her lover was not present.

Most people knew of Mr. Westmorland's paralytic stroke ; it was generally attributed to the mortification and rage consequent upon his son's unsuitable engagement. Mrs. Saxon might have felt considerably cast down, had she known to what an extent interest in Leo divided the honours of the day with the interest in domestic sanitation.

A large crowd certainly gathered round Miss Dinwiddie as she personally conducted a tour of inspection round the impromptu hospital, but a very considerable number hung about on the lawn, and watched the meeting of the Major and Miss Forde with greedy eyes. He looked very ill in the gay sunshine, though he smiled as he drew near the motionless girl.

"I am so sorry I missed you," he said, as he raised his hat and touched her hand. "I waited about the door of the lecture marquee to catch you as you went in ; but I blundered, I suppose."

"I wish you had caught me," she said, with an effort after her old liveliness, "you would have spared me a most terrible quarter-of-an-hour. I have learned that my days are numbered unless I at once begin to wear clothes of a totally different cut and material. I have been slowly committing suicide ever since I was a baby without knowing it. Are you not horrified ?"

"Worse than that," chimed in Disney, "she has been poisoning herself in small doses by the use—the habitual use, as I understand—of that diabolical article, a tea-cosy."

"Most serious," replied Evelyn, with a ghost of the smile with which he had been wont to reward Leo's nonsense, "but can you spare me a few minutes now ? My father would like—would be so pleased—will you come with me and see him ?"

"Oh . . . certainly. Of course," she answered, in a voice audibly deficient in heartiness. "Captain Disney, you must drink zoedone without me."

"I shall be able to tell you what it tastes like," he replied, moving off with a parting salutation and a laugh which ended in a sigh.

In the refreshment-tent he came upon Richard, who was making himself a most efficient *aide-de-camp* to Mrs. Saxon in the way of handing about fruit, ices, cakes, sandwiches, champagne, etc. Into this task Edgar threw himself with vigour, and made himself, as usual, most popular with the ladies, unblushingly claiming acquaintance with Mrs. Hancock, and refilling her glass so assiduously that she felt it more and more of an effort to continue to maintain her hostile attitude against him.

But when at last the edge of the Norchester appetite seemed to be growing blunted, he went up to Richard, and, lightly flicking crumbs from his fashionably cased legs with his handkerchief, he said, in a low voice,

"Dick—what on earth is wrong with Westmorland?"

Forde started, raising his eyes apprehensively to his friend; then, turning to the buffet, he took a sandwich, slowly consuming a mouthful before he asked,

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," returned Edgar, selecting a peach, "that something is jolly wrong with him. If I didn't know the man too well, I would say he had a crime on his conscience."

"He has seemed to me out of spirits," said Dick, very reluctantly.

It is always disagreeable to have one's own misgivings put into words by somebody else.

"Out of spirits! He is simply not fit to speak to! Now he always was of the quiet sort, but as sociable and pleasant a fellow as you would wish to meet. Just now, by all precedent, he ought to be in topping

spirits, engaged to as lovely a girl as there is in the county."

"You think so too? I have thought—it has dawned upon me lately that she is pretty," said Dick, thoughtfully.

"In two years she will be a beauty," asserted Disney, with conviction.

"As you say, it is strange. To tell you the honest truth, it has bothered me the last few days. While his father was so bad, he never seemed to think of her—scarcely sent her a message; then—this sounds trivial, but girls think of these things—he has given her nothing, not even a ring."

"I imagine the father is at the bottom or it: cantankerous, eh?"

"He is always cantankerous."

"Ah, yes! Doesn't approve! As he leads Westmorland by the nose, I think that is really enough to give the origin of his gloom."

"You are utterly mistaken. Mr. Westmorland is most delighted with the match—frantically, disproportionately so! No, the motive is deeper than that. Once or twice I have feared that I knew it."

"Feared?"

Richard set down his glass, glanced around the fast-emptying tent, then at his companion, and drew out his pocket-book.

"It's not very long ago since Westmorland consulted me about a curious matter," he said. "I wonder if I dare tell you?"

"Of course," said Disney, self-denyingly, "I don't want to hear anything that's a breach of confidence."

"I was not asked to keep it dark," returned Forde; "and, to tell you the truth, I should be glad to have somebody's opinion on the subject." He drew from his pocket-book a folded paper. "Read this, and I will explain to you what it is supposed to mean," he said. "It is, as far as can be discovered, an authentic utterance, dating back indisputably to the fourteenth century, and very likely older still."

Disney took it, and read it through.

"I should say that to call that nonsense was putting the case too mildly," he said, gravely. "It seems to me confusion worse confounded."

Dick explained the situation, and gave the interpretation, according to Mr. Westmorland.

"I see," at last said the captain, slowly. "The old man believes, on the authority of this piece of rubbish that his race will become extinct unless Evelyn marries before next first of March! Well, why shouldn't it become extinct? Old races usually do; it's a way they have: and I suppose Miss Dinwiddie and her physiological ladies could tell us why. H'm! Then I suppose you think that pressure was put upon the Major to induce him to hurry into an engagement before he really knew what he was about? But my good sir, the man who was *not* in love with your sister would be a very clod! Surely that cannot be the whole reason of this settled gloom?"

A red spot was burning in Dick's cheeks, and his eyes were bright with excitement.

"It's what I don't like to think of Westmorland," he said, angrily, "but it looks to me like it. He is a man of exaggerated conscientiousness: the feeling of having practised more or less of a deception would be quite enough to put him into this remarkable state of mind. But he had better be careful. My sister has a brother; as he would soon find out, if he tried any nonsense. I won't have her humiliated before the whole of Norchester."

Disney looked attentively at him, and seemed to reflect.

"You would not let her marry a man who did not care for her? You would not throw her away?" he said at last.

"Ah, but—but—suppose she cares for him?" blurted out poor Dick.

"Oh, I see," replied the Captain, with due gravity; but as he spoke he glanced in a large mirror near, and passed his hand over his fine moustache to hide

a suspicious curving of the lips ; and some inward feeling caused his pulses to beat, and his blood to warm. The idea of Miss Forde's woes, it would appear, did not afflict him very profoundly.

The mirror showed him more than the reflection of his own goodly self ; it painted the door of the tent, through which Major Westmorland and his betrothed were slowly entering. The grave eyes of the girl lit up as she saw that her brother and the Captain were the only two present.

Dick turned quickly towards his sister, forgetting the sheet of paper which his companion held in his hand. Disney, quietly folding it up, placed it carefully in his own pocket.

"The world is in the marquee," announced Leo, "listening to an ambulance lecture. I would not go in, it is so hot, and they talk of things which take away my appetite. A man with a note-book and a pencil came up and asked me what my dress was made of ; I think everybody is a little cracked this afternoon."

The voice sounded mocking, and a little weary : unlike Leo. She sank down into a basket-chair, and smiled her thanks to Disney for the cup of creamy, fragrant coffee which he procured at once, before Evelyn had realised what she wanted.

"Anything hot is nice, this treacherous day," said she, complainingly. "I do dislike this cold, bleak sunshine, trying to pretend it is really summer ! All the women who have come in thin dresses have red noses ! Ridiculous !"

"This thing is, nevertheless, suggestive of the dog-days," said Disney, sitting down beside her and taking up a parasol of some diaphanous canary-coloured stuff.

"Just so ! A fly-away parasol for effect, a warm dress for comfort !"

"Most sensible ! And typical of the wearer, I humbly suggest. Plenty of sparkle outwardly, plenty of sense inwardly."

"You have seen Mr. Westmorland, Leo, so Evelyn tells me," interrupted Richard.

"Yes," she replied, looking up at him, "he is very ill."

"He is much better," hurriedly interposed the Major, "and it was a great pleasure to him to see you."

"He was very kind to me," she said. "I hope he will be better soon."

A shadow seemed to fall alike on face and voice when she spoke of her future marriage, or anything concerning it.

"It must be a relief to you to see him mending so fast ; it is a far more rapid convalescence than I had ventured to hope for," said Dick to Evelyn. "I hope that, now the anxiety is over, you will be more free ; come and dine with us to-morrow."

"Ay, do : we see nothing of you," echoed Disney.

"You're very good, but I must take my father to Feverell Chase to-morrow ; the Saxons go to Scotland, you know."

"So they do, I had forgotten," said Dick, with a slight shrug.

"My father is very anxious that Miss—ah!—that Leo should come and stay with us," went on the Major. "He will write to-morrow, to Lady Royd, my mother's aunt, and ask her to bring some of her daughters to make the place more lively. He—wants to see you, if you could spare a moment ; he is so anxious for the wedding to be as soon as possible."

Dick looked anything but complaisant.

"I'll not have Leo hurried—mark that!" he said. "It shall take place when it pleases her, and not before—not a moment before. If she wants a year's grace, she shall have it."

"A year!" echoed Evelyn, in a way that aroused all Forde's doubts into active antagonism.

"Yes, a year. There is plenty of time."

"You know how anxious he is to see me married

before he—goes,” slowly urged the Major, in a low voice.

These two were speaking apart. Disney was busily opening peach-stones for Leo, and extracting the kernels. Dick answered, steadily,

“She must take her own time. She is very young. I will not take upon myself the responsibility of urging her.”

Evelyn looked at Leo. At the moment, her soft, pretty laugh rang out as it had been wont to do before she was over-awed by her severe wooer. What a picture it was of healthful, gleeful girlhood, and handsome, conquering manhood! What a head Disney had! And how his fair locks showed up Leo's dark ones!

As he gazed, there swept over him anew a feeling of helplessness. What was he to do with this bright, freakish creature? Could he make her happy? He did not understand her as Disney appeared to do. Could he speak to her, or let Dick speak to her, of immediate marriage and residence with him and his paralytic father at Feverell. As Muriel had said before, it seemed incongruous.

CHAPTER XXXV.

ON SUCH A NIGHT AS THIS—SO FULL OF STARS!

That was I you heard last night,
When there rose no moon at all.

.
Can't one even die in peace?
When one shuts one's eyes on youth,
Is that face the last one sees?

Serenade at the Villa.

THE second lecture was over, and swarms of people again poured into the refreshment-tent. Mrs. Short-house, finding herself near Leo, offered tepid congrat-

ulations. Several other ladies, so encouraged, followed suit ; but there seemed little heartiness in their expressions of goodwill. The fact added to the girl's own secret, restless depression. She had been on the whole very popular in Norchester—the dull, heavy town had secretly felicitated itself on the possession of such a treasure. Her beauty and her spirits had been admired and wondered at, with a rather surprising tolerance ; her position, as the young doctor's sister, had not been exalted enough to make people feel that they could not patronize her. They had made a point of encouraging “that pretty little Miss Forde. Unsophisticated—very ! But then you see she is so young, and, with a few hints from *me*, she will soon be all that one could desire ; and, besides, she must be very lonely, brought up as she was in a large family.”

Such had been the kindly feeling which had filled the breasts of the neighbouring matrons when Leo appeared on the scenes. Even Mrs. Hancock, as has been hinted, would not have objected to her as a daughter-in-law, to be paraded in public, crushed and dictated to in private. But now it seemed to these worthy people as though the young girl had stolen a march upon them all. She had used them and their kindness as stepping-stones to advance herself. Now she had wormed herself into the Hesselburgh *côterie*, she no longer needed the tennis at the Residence which had formerly been so acceptable.

She had soared too high. She had secured a position which would have been considered a marvellous piece of good fortune, even for one of the bishop's numerous daughters ; in a few months she would be sweeping into all the best dining-rooms in the district, taking precedence of all her late patronesses, doubtless presented at court !

It was too much.

Leo partly understood, half regretted the change. She wanted to be encouraged about her forthcoming marriage, to be reassured, as it were, by the envy

and admiration of all around her. Every one looked grave over it, as it seemed to her ; even Mrs. Saxon, who had said, in her downright way,

“ I hope it may bring you happiness, my dear, but you are very young to be making a life-long choice.”

Nobody seemed pleased, except old Mr. Westmorland, and his joy terrified her.

No one could tell how she had been obliged to nerve herself for that first interview to-day. Dick had warned her to expect to find him much changed, but none the less had she recoiled with inward repulsion, from the sight of the poor distorted mouth and drawn-down head and shoulder. To kiss him, as he ardently entreated, seemed the climax of all possible endurance ; and, as she sat, trying to grasp the purport of the compliments he uttered in his now imperfect and impeded articulation, she said to herself that she could never make up her mind to live in the same house with one so distressingly afflicted. It seemed as if the Major's love-making were to be done by proxy. The old man had a ring for her—a magnificent Marquise ring—the family sapphire, circled in diamonds ; he held her slim hand, smiling to see the stones dart fire upon it, he stammered forth how much he envied Evelyn, how he wished he were young again, and wondered how his son had ever had the face to ask her to accord him so great, so unexpected a grace. She would come down to Feverell, would she not, to see her future home, and to gladden the hearts of the two lonely men who would count the minutes until she came ? So he had drivelled on, in husky, halting accents, until her appealing glances had brought Evelyn to the rescue and he had led her away.

The old man readily let them go, nodding his head with a would-be smile on the poor down-drawn mouth, as he said he knew that, under certain circumstances, two was company and three none.

The two had walked in silence down the long, deserted corridor, through the open windows of

which floated in dim echoes of applause from the marquee. Half-way along, Evelyn asked her abruptly,

"He is worse than you thought?"

"Yes, he is," answered Leo thoughtfully, adding, with a desire to soften this harsh statement, "I dare say he will be better soon."

"But, if you had seen him three days ago, you would think him greatly improved now," said Evelyn, with a sigh.

"Was he so bad? You must have been very anxious."

"I was; but as soon as his mind cleared I knew he would get well. It made him so unspeakably happy, that he was quite amiable."

"What made him happy? What is 'it'?"

"What? why, you to be sure. You are curing him," he said fervently.

"I?"

"Yes; he is delighted that you—that I—that you have promised——"

"I see," was her hasty answer.

"He is so fond of you, I am sure you will grow to love him," he went on, in his folly, never seeing how utterly meaningless all this talk was to the girl beside him.

She looked at him meditatively; her glance was critical and cold, very unlike the passionate girlish worship of so few days back. She was being very rapidly disillusioned, and Edgar Disney was helping more in the process than he knew.

It had been pleasant to be out of doors again, and in his cheery society. He could always make her laugh. Now, when the people flocked out from the marquee and surrounded them, he came to the rescue at once.

"Let us go and do the rounds in due form," he said, "there are some things displayed here in sober earnest which would make a cat laugh. Woollen towels, for one thing: everything must be natural wool now—

adays, you know, and of course woollen towels are of no earthly use to dry one's skin withal, so the hygienic faction are fain to announce that it is healthier to remain wet. And this is in England, at the close of this century ! What a nation of faddists we are becoming !”

“ Well,” said Dick, good-humouredly, “ one must, for the credit of one's reputation, say that everybody always did everything wrong until we came to set it right. It keeps people so happy and busy to turn the existing state of things upside down ; and then there is employment for the next generation, to put it all back again. I think old Herr Kinderspeisen is the worst of them all, though. He button-holed me just now with a paper of statistics. Not feed babies on milk ! Pretty good isn't it ? ”

“ And so we go on,” moralised Edgar, “ and I suppose, after all, we are not much worse than we used to be ; whenever I am tempted to think that we are the climax of folly, I remember that my ancestors, after a dinner-party, used to have straw littered down around the dining-table and make a night of it.”

“ And you think they would not have been worse employed even in trying to rub themselves dry on a health towel ? ” laughed Tom Saxon, who had caught the remark in passing.

“ No, I really think not ; and it is saying a good deal,” cried Disney, brightly.

“ Ah, you wait till you've tried, that's all ! ” was Tom's oracular reply.

There were glances of disapproval from all who were within earshot ; the ladies, lately so hostile to science, had been profoundly impressed by the speakers of the day, and to treat so important a subject with levity was most unfitting, they thought. Disney, with characteristic, gay impertinence, attacked Mrs. Saxon herself, who was standing near, hearty and radiant.

“ Now, Mrs. Saxon, I appeal to you, as a lady of judgment, who is doubtless clothed from head to foot

in natural wool, I appeal to you for a candid answer : would you, could you, bring yourself to use a natural wool towel? ”

“Certainly not, odious things!” was the prompt reply. “Has your experience not yet taught you that a sensible idea is sure to be carried to extremes by foolish people? It is inevitable. Why distress yourself about the woollen towels? Nobody will use them, and they will die a natural death; they are not worth making a fuss about.”

“Natural wool should surely be undyed to die a natural death,” slyly whispered Disney to Leo, as the hostess hurried off; but, low as was the whisper, Tom caught it and groaned.

“Where are your usual powers, Captain Disney?”

“Natural wool-gathering,” laughed Edgar, as he left the tent with the Fordes and Major Westmorland.

The day was a huge success, altogether. The whole town laid down its arms, and surrendered unconditionally to the ambassadors of sanitation. When, at the close of the proceedings, the bishop announced the inauguration of the Norchester branch, and invited any intending members to come forward, the summons was responded to by the enrolment of a couple of hundred names.

The Fordes and Captain Disney remained to supper amongst the Saxons’ own friends, and as the evening went on, Leo began to feel her spirits rise. Evelyn thawed more than he had ever done before : he sat next her, and talked a good deal, for him, his theme being malarial fever of which he had seen a good deal in India, and concerning which he differed in opinion from the doctor who had lectured that afternoon. It was a subject which lent itself to anecdote, and he told her tales of his camp life which interested and thrilled her, and made her feel proud of him.

After supper, he took her into the library, which was deserted, and told her how sorry he was to be leaving her to-morrow, and how much he hoped she would very soon come to Feverell.

"I want to know you better," he said, humbly. "We seem such strangers, do we not?"

"I am so shy of you," replied she, with beautiful blushes.

"And I of you," he confessed, "strange as it may sound."

The idea made them both smile; and she looked so pretty, and was so close to him, that he kissed her; and, as she did not resent this, possessed himself of her hand, and asked her if she liked her ring.

"It was such a pleasure to him to give it you," he said; "but by rights it was my privilege, was it not?"

"I saw Mrs. Shorthouse admiring it all supper-time," laughed Leo. "She will describe it to Mrs. Hancock. Did you know that you and I were the centre of attraction this evening?"

"No!" he returned, in some consternation, making her laugh again, quite merrily: but, at this moment, Richard's voice was heard calling her.

"I must go," she said, "but I will come up to the station, as you suggest, to-morrow, to say 'good-bye' to your father. I daresay Captain Disney will bring me, if Dick is away. He is so nice, isn't he?"

"Who? Disney?"

"Yes. You and he are great friends, are you not?"

"He has altered a great deal since I knew him," replied Evelyn, sternly; "or I have."

Leo looked at him questioningly, but there was no time for more, as footsteps were drawing near; so, with a hurried farewell, she made her escape from the room, and he followed her into the hall.

Richard was buttoning his coat, and bidding Mrs. Saxon farewell.

"You may indeed congratulate yourself—it has been more than a success, it has been a New Departure," he said, cordially. "I believe the whole tone of local thought will be changed from this day forward. You are a pioneer, Mrs. Saxon."

The good lady was radiant,

"I don't know what I should have done without you, doctor," said she, shaking hands heartily. "You have been invaluable, pray accept my thanks. Dr. Compton mentioned you to me in the most complimentary terms. I heard him telling Mrs. Shorthouse that he thought the district most fortunate in the possession of such a thoroughly scientific young fellow."

"I am several inches taller. But allow me to say that I value your commendations a great deal more than even Dr. Compton's," replied Richard, with his eyes on Muriel's golden hair.

"Good-night," he said to her, in a low voice, a minute later. "You look tired."

"Yes, I am tired," replied she, a little weariness apparent in her calm tones. "These things are rather exhausting; I wish Hope had been here, she would have been such a help."

Tom, who was standing near, took up the word.

"Ah, true for you, old lady," he said, mournfully. "We wanted Hope. If Hope had been here, the whole affair would have tasted different, somehow! Doesn't a fellow miss her, just?"

Evelyn was advancing down the hall with Leo, and he heard these words. They tore open his wound so desperately, he felt as if he would bleed to death.

It was a fearfully sharp pang—a refinement of agony. How should he go on? How could he do without her?

Just for those few minutes in the library his fate had seemed almost bearable. What a delusion did Tom's light words show such a thought to be!

He felt as if his misery must choke him. Dazed, he followed Leo's graceful figure down the hall; mechanically he helped her up to her seat beside Disney in the car.

Richard sprang up behind, beside Joe.

"Miss Forde tells me I shall see you again," cried Edgar, gaily. "My mission to-morrow, it seems, is to drive a disconsolate fair lady to the parting tryst with her true love. How many pocket-handkerchiefs

ought I to take with me to lend to my friends in case of an emergency? Poor old chap!" to Evelyn. "No wonder you look down in the mouth. What would you give me to drive the mare home—eh! Jove! what a night," he added, more solemnly, gazing up into the pearl-strewn heavens. "I hope you have wraps enough, Miss Leone,—those stars look like frost?"

"I am as warm as a toast, thank you! Dick, it was clever of you to make me bring my furs! How glorious the sky is! I think I never saw the stars so bright! Look, Evelyn, at the milky way. Is it not lovely?"

Evelyn turned his tragic face up to those mute, spacious heavens, and in his sore heart was the longing, which Hope had felt so often, to be away beyond the stars, where the weary find rest.

"You look like Hamlet, in the churchyard scene," laughed Edgar; "how becoming the starlight is, old man!"

And then the mare found she had had enough of it, and dashed off down the avenue.

"Good-bye, Evelyn!" rang out Leo's clear voice. He wished, for her sake, that he might never hear it again.

To go indoors was impossible; he wandered away, blind with pain, into the dark garden, in and out, stumbling in the dim light now and then over a tent rope.

Still the vast glittering sky overarched him. Wherever she was—his darling—at that moment, the same glory of stars bowed over her. If so she willed, she might lift her sweet eyes to the same point of brilliancy on which his were fixed: it seemed to create a point of meeting. Wherever she was, he prayed God that she was well and happy.

At that very moment Hope was coming out of the room in which Guy was convalescent; he was asleep, after a day of fidgeting which had sorely tried her patience. Now that he was growing stronger, neither

his tongue nor his limbs were ever still. Wilf was admitted into the same room with him, and the two together were, as Nurse White remarked, "enough to bewilder a saint."

Wilf was a credulous little boy, far less imaginative than Guy, but of tenacious memory, and given to repeating everything he heard. For instance—

"Do you know, Aunt Hope, one of the boys at our school saw a cat swallow a rat—whole! He *saw* the cat do it, and Guy says he doesn't believe it's true!"

"Do you know, Aunt Hope," Guy would retort, mocking, "that a man papa knows once saw a 'bus horse swallow a conductor? He bolted him, you know. It was done in a minute."

"Oh, Guy!" from Wilf, in horrified accents, "is that true?"

"Yes, just about as true as your precious cat and rat story."

"Oh, Guy, you *are* unkind! Isn't he awfully unkind, Aunt Hope?"

"Don't tease him, Guy dear. There! I have disentangled the knot from your wool: you can go on again."

Guy's stumpy fingers travelled obediently through his knitting for nearly two minutes: when the result of Wilf's cogitations were suddenly hurled at his audience in the shape of this conundrum.

"But, Aunt Hope, just supposing a 'bus horse *did* eat up a conductor—just supposing, you know: would they try the horse for murder?"

A whole day of this sort of thing had well-nigh wearied out Hope's patience. She had been feeling dull and heavy-headed all day, too, though, since Mabel Thorpe had been declared out of danger, she had felt as happy as it seemed probable she ever would feel.

Now Bowen came softly to relieve guard, and bade her young mistress go to bed at once.

Hope bent for a last look at Guy's beautiful,

resolute face on the pillow : he was very like the young aunt who bent over him.

"Miss Merrion, it's courting infection to hang over the child like that," remonstrated Bowen.

"It will be ten days to-morrow since I came," whispered Hope, smiling, "so I ought to sicken now if I mean to, ought I not?"

"Don't talk so, miss : you terrify me."

Hope went out on tiptoe, a smile on her white face. There was no blind to the landing window, and the stars showed through it. Raising the sash, she leaned out into the night. It was still, cold, and glittering. Far off, she could hear the murmur of the sea, in its restless monotony, rising and falling on its dark shore unceasingly.

A step on the gravel sidewalk. She withdrew her eyes from the stars, and looked down ; in the deep shadow she was hidden from view, but the dim radiance of the sky was on the face of the gentleman who passed, looking up at the house as he did so.

It was Gilbert Greville.

"I told you so," murmured Hope to herself, with first a dash of amusement, and then a sigh of pain.

When he had gone by, she softly closed the window, and went to her room ; and, as she drank the chocolate which Bowen had placed in readiness for her, she realised, with a sudden access of an emotion impossible to define, that it had become a matter of difficulty to swallow. Her throat was sore.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE LAST DAY.

This is my holiday.

JULIAN STURGIS.

"Let us be merry, and devise sports!"

"With all my heart! What think you of falling in love?"

SHAKESPEARE.

CAPTAIN DISNEY seemed in no hurry to leave Norchester: he found the little house in Minstergate exceedingly comfortable. People perturbed themselves considerably about his continued presence there. In fact, Miss Press spoke to the doctor about it.

Miss Lucy Press might fairly be considered to rank as the first martyr to science in Norchester. So impressed had the eldest sister been by the solemn warnings of the lecturer, that she immediately had the whole system of drainage in her quaint old house inspected; and thereby had proved the truth of the adage, "Let sleeping dogs lie." The awakened smells had given Miss Lucy, the youngest, a touch of gastric fever, and Richard was in attendance. He laughed very unconcernedly over the timid lady's hint that perhaps Miss Forde and Captain Disney were thrown too much in each other's society.

"You see, my sister is engaged to Major Westmorland," he said. "In two or three days she is going off to stay at Feverell Chase. I shall be very glad of the Captain's company when she is gone."

"Humph!" was Mrs. Hancock's comment, when this was repeated to her. "I don't fancy, somehow, that he'll stay very long after she's gone, do you?"

"Do you fancy he admires her?" fluttered Miss

Press : "dear ! how many lovers Leo Forde seems to have ——"

"I suppose Mrs. Saxon would be the last person to warn young Forde that he was outraging propriety," snapped Mrs. Hancock. "She is a woman who sets all custom at defiance, and no doubt, if she is satisfied, he does not care what other people think ;" which was truer than the speaker knew.

Leo's going to Feverell had been postponed owing to Lady Royd's inability to be present : but now a day had really been fixed. She was to go on the 9th of October, and the 6th had already arrived.

Her departure being thus definitely arranged, the Captain began to realise that he should miss her greatly. He wished Westmorland would invite him too to Feverell ; he was curious to see what became of the engagement.

Leone puzzled him a great deal. She was not at all like a girl whose heart was a hundred miles off. In fact, directly her *fiancé* left Hesselburgh, she seemed to shake off a certain constraint, and to grow more amiable and more charming daily.

He found himself remembering her words, trying to recall her tones—chuckling to himself over some of her nonsensical little speeches. He could not help suspecting that it was she, and she alone, who cast so enchanting a glamour over the young doctor's household.

The lazy amusement with which he had at first watched the engagement between her and Major Westmorland had changed, since he read the mystic prophecy, into a feeling of a most uncomfortable description. The uncouth lines had been studied by him so often since they came into his possession, that they seemed to repeat themselves over and over again in his head :

"Withouten Hope it shulde betyde,
The last sonne is an onely childe.
Sonne ys hee of a yonger sonne,
Ner wyfe ne childer hath hee non,"

The more he thought of them, the more he felt persuaded that Evelyn's motive for marrying was not love. The suspicion made him more wretched than he could at all account for. When Leone came singing into the room with a handful of flowers from her old walled garden, and proceeded with lazy grace to dash them, apparently pell-mell, into various bowls and jars, where the effect was instant and telling, he would lay down his newspaper or his novel, and, with his cigar slowly expiring between his fingers, watch her earnestly with an aroused look in his beautiful eyes, and a mind full of dismal speculations. He would fancy the song quenched, the elasticity gone from the girlish movements : he hated to fancy her as Evelyn's wife.

"Miss Leo," he said, on the morning of the sixth, when he had so watched her silently some minutes. "Let us finish gloriously. Shall we?"

"What can you possibly mean?" said she, with the light awaking in eyes a moment before clouded with dark thoughts.

"My visit here has been—is so—Well, I hardly know what to say. Pleasant is too mild a word. It has been such a delightful experience : so unlike any sort of pleasure I ever knew before."

He broke off, for Leo had made an involuntary movement as of escape. It was only momentary : soon she had commanded voice and complexion, and said, quietly,

"I am glad we have succeeded in preventing your feeling dull. I was afraid, after the Saxons went, you must find this place anything but enlivening."

"What a jaded wreck you must have thought me," he laughingly answered. "No, I am thankful to say my powers of enjoyment are not so entirely worn out. The suggestion I now have to make is that my visit should close suitably, with a grand finale of some kind. Did you not say you have never seen Marvaulx Abbey?"

Her face kindled.

"No, I never saw it."

"I propose that you, Dick, and I should make a day of it. It is too much for the mare in one day, so I suggest that Joe takes her over to Letley Bridge to-morrow, and that, on Wednesday, we take the train to Letley, and drive on from there—the whole expedition to be my affair entirely. You look pleased: it is my good fortune to suggest something that gives you pleasure?"

"Indeed it does!" she cried, gladly. "What a capital idea. I shall enjoy it so much; the looking forward to it will quite prevent my dwelling on my visit to——"

She checked herself, covered with confusion; and an awkward silence supervened. At last she spoke, slowly, and a little proudly.

"I should not have confessed," she said, "that I am shy of my visit to Feverell; but I am. I have never met Lady Royd nor her daughters, and I wish that Richard were going with me. I am afraid of criticism."

"It is most natural," gravely replied Edgar, laying down his cigar; "and yet—forgive me if I say that, were I in Westmorland's place I should be dissatisfied." He rose determinedly, and came near where she stood. "Were you engaged to me," he said, in tense tones, "I would demand that you should come gladly to the world's end if I were there."

Leone had plenty of pluck. Beyond the whiteness of her face, there was nothing to show that she was moved.

"But I am not engaged to you," she replied, steadily, "and it seems futile to talk such nonsense."

So saying, she took her empty water-can, and went out of the room to replenish it.

He flung himself down on the sofa, with an angry word, and perturbed countenance.

"I do not believe she cares for him," he reflected, bitterly. "She is afraid of him, and that is the whole of the matter."

When Dick was consulted, he agreed delightedly to the idea of the expedition, and next day, Joe and the mare were despatched, to put up at the inn at Letley Bridge, and be in readiness at the station the following morning.

The weather, now that October had begun, had improved again, as sometimes happens. The sky was of faint tender blue, a warm haze covered the distances, and the woods were beginning to show their gorgeous panoply of scarlet, crimson, and gold, when Leo came downstairs on the ninth, ready for their early breakfast and start.

"Oh, how delightful," she cried, "to think that we are not going to waste this perfect day, but to make the very most of it!"

"Eat plenty of breakfast," Disney urged her, "you will be hungry before you get any dinner. Where's that rascal Richard? He will not have time for a mouthful."

"I hope no patient has turned up to delay him," cried Leo. "I heard the surgery bell just now."

Edgar cut a plateful of ham, and put it ready in Dick's place. Leo buttered his toast, but when ten minutes had elapsed, and he came not, she went out to seek him.

He was not in the surgery at all, and, as she came through the hall, she noticed that his hat was gone.

"I do really believe that he must have been called out," she announced, in dismay.

"It is exceedingly awkward if he has," observed Edgar, "we ought to start the moment the fly comes; if we miss this train, there is not another for two hours."

After a short period of waiting, somebody knocked at the front door, and a note was brought to Leo.

It was from Richard; a hurried pencil scrap.

"The Deanery.

"Very sorry; no chance of my getting off; the Dean—lungs, I am afraid, but as yet doubtful. Can-

not say when I may be back, or if I could meet you anywhere. Am breakfasting here.

“R. F.”

“Well!” cried Leo, trying to laugh off her vexation, “I seem doomed to disappointment!”

Edgar took the note and read it.

“Well, I’m sorry that he’s not available for the start,” he said, composedly, “but you must put up with me until he comes.”

“Oh, we cannot go without him,” dejectedly answered the girl, sinking down into an arm-chair. “We must give it up.”

“Give it up! No such thing! We can’t do that. There is no telegraph to Letley, and Joe won’t know what to do. You see, Dick suggests meeting us somewhere, he evidently does not contemplate our changing plans.”

“Oh, but I don’t really think——” began Leo, and stopped short, reddening.

“Ah, I see!” cried Edgar, unscrupulously, “you do not trust me! That is it! I said something the other day, which I had no right to say, and you cannot be sure of my not repeating the offence.”

“Oh, you are very unkind!” said Leo, indignantly.

“It seems hard,” recklessly went on he, “that I may not have this one day’s happiness. Westmorland will have you all the rest of your life. You need scarcely grudge me my farewell pleasure, I think. It will soon be over, and you will be with your lover to-morrow. Could you not put up with me to-day?”

She was mute, not understanding the reason of this outburst. At last—

“You must see,” she slowly said, “that I could hardly go—why will you ask it? You see quite well what I mean: you know I want to go.”

“Then, in the name of common sense, why not go? I write a line to Richard, telling him where to meet us; I leave a fly at Letley to bring him on; he will

be able to get away, right enough; he certainly, from this note, means us to go. Read it again."

"I wish he would be more explicit," said Leo, looking at her brother's scrawl.

"He knows I shall understand," said Edgar impetuously.

As usual, where his own desires were strong, every other consideration went to the wall; he was determined to go, and Leone, all of whose wishes pointed in the same direction, was quite unable to hold out for long.

The fly, driving up to the door, clinched the matter, though why it should do so was scarcely obvious. Edgar scribbled directions on a card for Richard, which he stuck on the clock; the same directions were also repeated verbally to the housemaid, who was left with injunctions to hurry the doctor off the moment he came in; and, in an incredibly short space of time, Leo found herself really off, driving with Edgar up the town, where it was fortunately, as yet, too early for the gossip-mongers to be about.

The full beauty of the day became first apparent when they were seated in the train. It was so sunny and warm, and still and dreamlike, that Leo wondered if it were all really true; that she was awake and in her senses—engaged to Evelyn Westmorland, and sitting opposite Edgar Disney in a railway-carriage, as they rushed through the autumn land.

The country was uneventful until they reached Letley Bridge, where Joe and the cart were duly in waiting. The groom was left at the station to procure a carriage, and to bring Richard on when he arrived, and the young couple started off together on their twelve miles' drive.

When they started, Disney was somewhat silent; but, as they advanced into the beautiful scenery which surrounds Marvaulx, he turned to his companion with a smile.

"Are you enjoying it?"

"It is simply beautiful. I am drinking it in."

"Better than stopping at home—eh?"

"Oh!" she cried, impulsively, "I am glad I came!"

"So am I," he said, in a low tone, "glad you came. I want to enjoy this one day, without thinking of to-morrow."

He saw her gay face cloud instantly, and his heart began to beat excitedly. The girl's beauty had made a profound impression upon him: he could not bear to see that look. Something was wrong—something must be desperately wrong between her and Westmorland. If he could but find out what it was! He wondered at himself, as he drove on, to think how entirely Leone had chased Hope Merrion's image from his mind. In his heart of hearts, he felt nearer to Leo than he had ever done to Hope. His engagement had been, after all, an effort.

When Hope first appeared in Colombo, her triumph had been universal. She was raved over: every man that Disney knew was in love with her: he himself had been completely overmastered by her wonderful charm. When she accepted him, his elation and triumph had raised him to the seventh heaven; and yet, as he grew to be with her, and talked to her on terms of greater intimacy, he had felt uncomfortably that it was a strain: that he was not exactly acting a part, but acting so much above his usual level that the continuance of it would be a labour. With Leone he never felt thus.

The motives which guide human conduct are very strange: sometimes very small. If Leo had not been engaged when he first met her, she might never have made so deep an impression. The Captain would have been more wary, and kept himself upon a different footing; for Leo was not by any means a brilliant match.

Knowing her appropriated, he had associated with her fearlessly: and he began to fear that he had gone too far for his own peace of mind.

The shadow still rested on Leo's face as he looked by stealth at her. How beautiful was the line of her profile: the impetuous mouth, the rounded chin, the line of throat, and the graceful sweep of her young form, in its neatly-fitting garment.

"Leo," he said, very low, "I beseech you smile upon me. If you look sad, you make a strange swelling come in my throat, and these yellow stubble fields seem so forlorn, and even the blue sky is grieving."

She shivered, and for a little made no reply, but soon seemed to nerve herself to answer.

"Is it fair—is it right—to talk to me like this?" she faltered.

"No," he said, energetically, "it is not! I am a poor cowardly wretch, unable to keep my own feelings in the background; you must help me to be strong, help me by being gay and like yourself."

"Gay and like myself," she repeated, with a wistful smile. "That is not easy, to-day."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

LEO'S TREASON.

Love hangs like light about your name

As music round the shell;

No heart can take of you a tame

Farewell.

SWINBURNE.

"Why is it not easy to-day?" he asked gently.

She did not answer: and after a little silence, he spoke again of something different.

"There is Marvaulx," he said, pointing with his whip to where the white walls of the abbey gleamed in the distance. "This is a long hill; will you care to walk a little way?"

“Yes.”

She assented. He lifted her down, and they walked side by side up the steep slope.

He was really sorry for his own unguardedness, and anxious to reassure her. Presently he intended to have her entire confidence, and he knew that this could never be accomplished if he scared her now, or was in any way too sudden or abrupt.

All the way up the hill he chatted to her of the old abbey and its history. It had been a convent of nuns, not a monastery, and a fearful interest had been imparted to it of late years by the discovery of a skeleton of a woman, bricked up in a wall. She was crouched together in such an attitude of mute despair as to leave no doubt of her having been buried alive. Leo had never heard the tale before, and it thrilled her to such an extent as to divert her thoughts from herself, as he had hoped it would.

By the time they had arrived at the quaint and primitive hostelry which stood just outside the abbey grounds, she had quite recovered her spirits.

Edgar ordered dinner, and secured some fruit for their present refreshment ; as they decided not to dine until Richard came. Then, leaving the horse and trap, they wandered away together into the wood which skirted the ruins.

Of all exquisite spots for love-making, Marvaulx is surely first and foremost. The curve of the pure stream circles it like a silver bow ; the rich woods hang over the pellucid water. The white tower is reflected in the river, and the ruin itself, in wonderful preservation, is as fine an example as we have of Early English in its oldest and severest form.

To the two who wandered, on that still sunny day, among the glades, its influence was almost overwhelming.

Dappled deer started shyly from the bracken as they advanced ; the broad sunlight lay warm upon the moss, and streamed through the dark foliage. The delicate hare-bells nodded in the dew, and the good

scent of the hot earth steamed up into the fragrant air.

They were apparently the only human creatures in this lonely paradise ; and the silence seemed to draw them nearer, ever nearer to each other.

They rested at last, in a warm nook outside a bend in the abbey wall. The sight of the niche, whence the bones of the unhappy nun had been taken, had sobered Leone, and again on her face was the shadow which Disney could not bear to see there.

"To be buried alive has always seemed to me the most dreadful death that I could picture," she said.

"I fancy it would be difficult to overestimate the horror of it," he answered.

"To have your life all strong in you," went on the girl, "and your heart beating, and the world—this beautiful world!" she glanced around—"spread out in your very sight, and for cruel hands to take you and fasten you up in the dark to die—ah! It is too shocking to think of; it makes one hate one's fellow-men, to think that anybody could ever have stood by and seen it done."

"Some women," slowly said Edgar, who was lying face downwards upon the moss, his head resting on his arm, "some women deliberately choose such a fate."

"What can you possibly mean?"

"I ought to have said that very few deliberately choose it: their parents and guardians choose it for them. They take them, and, as you say, shut them up in the dark to die; but nowadays the dying is not so quickly accomplished, sometimes it takes a lifetime of captivity and suffering quite to kill a woman."

She looked at him with dilated eyes, but did not speak.

"They brick up their souls, not their bodies, nowadays," he explained. "I fancy the suffering may be keener, because it lasts longer; I mean, of course—I am speaking figuratively. It seems to me that a

woman married to a man she does not love is walled up. The bright outer world is no more for her; she is alone, in cold and darkness; and no human power can release her, all her life."

Leo was as white as a sheet.

She put up her hand to shade her eyes.

At last, agitated words burst from her.

"But how is one to know? How can one be sure? How can one tell?"

"How can you be sure of what?" asked the Captain.

"That you really love;" her voice shook piteously.

"How is a girl to feel sure of her own feelings when they change so fast—when every day brings fresh thoughts and new ideas? If you could know how I have changed . . . how every feeling I had seems to have been transformed in the last few months! But I could not explain; I don't understand myself: all my mind is in such confusion that there seems no firm ground anywhere!"

She hid her face, while the warm wind whispered by, bringing puffs of seductive sweetness from the wallflowers which grew in the clefts of the ruined walls.

Edgar moved a little nearer to her, and took her hand. She drew it away with a start.

"Forgive me," said his gentle voice, "please forgive me, Leo. I would not hurt or wound you for the world. But I want to feel sure that you are happy. I am an old friend of Dick's, you know, and I like him extremely; I can see how his happiness is bound up in yours. Now, can you pardon it if I speak frankly to you? This may be the last time I shall ever dare so to address you, and in the past fortnight we have seemed to grow such friends: will you grant me the friend's privilege of plain speech?"

Her hands fell into her lap, and he saw her white face; her great eyes, melting in tears, fixed far away on the autumn woods. She did not look at him.

"Yes," she said, "you may speak. I feel—some—

times—as if you could help me—as if you could understand in a way that Dick cannot.”

His beautiful eyes kindled.

“I believe that is so,” he said, “and you make me very proud. Now, will you try to tell me what you meant, just now, when you said you were not sure of your own feelings. Did you mean—forgive my unspeakable boldness—did you mean your feelings towards—Westmorland?”

It was fine to see the rich blood spring to her face.

“Yes,” she answered, steadily, still not looking at him.

“Leo, you must let me tell you straight out. If your feeling towards him admits of a doubt, you cannot truly love him.” She started violently. “But, hear me,” he cried, earnestly, “I feel it so probable that you don’t understand yourself. Look into your heart—test it. Suppose I told you Westmorland was dead, that you would never see him again,”—she exclaimed faintly—“should you feel that it was the end of everything for you? How should you feel? Think what a noble fellow he is, and how handsome! Would his death mean a broken heart to you—at all events, for the present; would it turn your world to dust and ashes?”

She made no answer.

“Which would you feel more—his death or Dick’s?” softly pursued Edgar.

She gave a cry.

“Oh, Dick’s—Dick’s, of course!” she gasped out, tearfully. “Please don’t talk so horribly—I cannot even bear to think of such a thing as losing Dick!”

There was a long, long silence. Edgar never once took his eyes off her, watching the various feelings pass over her face in rapid change, like clouds casting shadows over the uplands.

At last she stretched both her hands out to her knees and wrung them together.

“What am I to do?” she said; and, after a pause: “I do not think I ought to marry him. . . . But,

when he asked me, I felt so sure I loved him : he is so good and noble. 'We needs must love the highest when we see it,' but I think he is too high up for me. I am a lower thing than I believed myself to be. . . . But what am I to do ? What can I do ?"

"*Fays ce que dois, advienne que pourra,*" said Disney, softly.

"Oh," she cried, "but how could I go back from my word, so lately given ? What would Richard think of me ? what would anybody think of such inconceivable fickleness ? why, it is not a month ago ! . . . I sit here, as if I were staring my own self in the face," she said, excitedly, "and I despise myself ! I say to myself, what a wretch must you be, Leone Forde, to do such a fearful thing ! to give such a binding, solemn promise, and not to be able to keep it for a month ! For a month ? . . . In my secret heart I believe I did not keep it for a week !" again she buried her face.

His heart was beating excitedly ; had her treason begun even sooner than she knew—when she met him on the station platform ?

"Leo," he said, solemnly, "which would be the worse thing : to own your mistake while there is yet time, or to stand in church and utter vows which, even now, before you make them, are broken, as you yourself confess ?"

"Oh, I don't know ! I don't know !" she cried. "I cannot understand it. Has it been all my fault ? Sometimes I think I should like to feel that he has been to blame too ! . . . He is so cold . . . so distant, and stiff ! It is simple truth to say that I know less of him now than when I engaged myself to him. He scarcely seems glad to see me ; I know he finds it difficult to talk to me ! I thought," said she, with quivering lip, "that I was superior to the desire for ordinary, vulgar love-making ; but a little more tenderness would perhaps—perhaps have made it easier to love him."

Disney, brought by this speech face to face with

his difficulty, dropped his forehead between his hands and deliberated a long time.

He had received from Leone a plain declaration that she did not love Westmorland; this she had given almost spontaneously, the pent-up distress of her mind finding vent at the first touch of sympathy. Her chief cause for unhappiness, naturally, was the fear that her fickleness would cause Westmorland to suffer. As if in opposition to this feeling, she had gone further, and said what certainly implied a doubt of his affection for her.

In these circumstances, should he be justified in telling her of this prophecy which lay in his pocket-book, suggesting so strongly another reason than love for the Major's wish to marry? To put the question in another form: should he be justified in keeping such knowledge from her?

When the girl's whole future hung in the balance, was it not his duty to put her in possession of all the facts?

It seemed to him as if the problem turned chiefly on the question of what were Evelyn's feelings. Did he love Leo? If so, what a treacherous hound was he, Disney.

But then he was secretly so certain that Evelyn was not in love with her. In fact, no other hypothesis seemed to account at all satisfactorily for his extraordinary behaviour. The situation was more deeply complicated by the fact, borne in upon the reasoner most vividly during the past few hours, that he himself did love Leone, deeply and strongly, far too much to be able to let her go calmly, even to a man she cared for. To see her sacrificed to some one whom confessedly she did not love, was a great deal more than he felt able to support with fortitude.

Here they sat, side by side; the hour was his. Her confidence in him showed pretty plainly that her heart went out to him: he could make her love him. Surely, surely, it was fair, taking all things into con-

sideration, to steal a march on Westmorland, to rescue certainly one person, perhaps two, from life-long misery.

It was a point of honour too delicate and too intricate for him to be able to see all its bearings. An inner voice seemed to say, beneath the strong current of his inclinations,

"Let this matter alone. Westmorland is your friend, and this girl plighted her troth to him. She did it of her own free will, and you know pretty accurately that, had you not appeared on the scenes, she would in all probability have had no doubts of her feelings. You are deliberately stealing her away from him, who was so loyal to you that he even declined to be friends with a girl who had, as he thought, treated you badly. Even now, if you had the fortitude to leave her, she would most likely, in her visit to Feverell, become more at ease with her grave suitor, and grow gradually happy with him. How do you know he does not care for her? Is he a man to wear his heart upon his sleeve! Think how her presence would brighten his life, her face illumine his lonely home. Dare you deliberately take her away from him?"

"Yes, I dare," he mentally replied. "My love for her is my justification. It is false to say that she could ever be happy with him. Had she never seen me, it might have been; but now it is too late. Am I to blame? Did I know how matters stood when I came to Norchester? Did Perseus, when he saw Andromeda, argue that, as all her relations had handed her calmly over, it was none of his business to try to save her? Pshaw! Away with such sentiment! I have seen the girl whom I love, and am I to sit down with folded hands and see her sacrificed?"

"Oh, yes, you love her now," argued the voice, "but how about next year, and all the years to come? How about Nellie Wetherell, Hope Merrion, and others who went before them? You are so easily

satisfied, is it worth while to make all this disturbance about Leone Forde?"

"I never loved Nellie Wetherell," was his answer. "I behaved like a villain to her, for I made her believe that I did. I did not love even Hope as I love Leone. She suits me. I feel calmly certain of always liking to have her with me through all the years to come. I love her more self-denyingly than ever before; she is poor, and the fact makes me love her better. It is a love worth risks, and I swear I will win her if I can."

At this determination had his disturbed thoughts arrived, when Leo broke the long silence.

She spoke straight on from the point of her own meditations.

"I have even thought," she said, more as if thinking aloud than as if addressing him, "once or twice it has occurred to me to wonder if he loves me at all; or if he is not marrying me to please his father."

"What should make you think that?" he asked, quickly.

She looked intently at him—for the first time since they began to talk.

"I think so," she said, "only because Mr. Westmorland seems so overjoyed about it, and because I feel sure that Evelyn would do anything to please his father."

"I suppose," said the Captain, staring at the ground, "that you know all about the prophecy?"

By the glance shot at him, he saw instantly that she knew nothing about it.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

For good or evil, the die was cast now.

"It is strange, I think, you have not been told; Richard knows all about it," he said.

"I hope you will explain," she answered.

He did explain. He drew out the rhyme and laid it before her, in Evelyn's handwriting. He unfolded to her its supposed meaning. She read it carefully, listened to what he said, and then leaned forward,

her chin on one hand, while the paper drooped idly from the other.

Edgar, as he looked attentively at her, knew that Evelyn's doom was sealed.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

EDGAR AS CONFIDANTE.

The books say well, my brothers—each man's life
The outcome of his former living is:
The bygone wrongs bring forth sorrow and woes,
The bygone right breeds bliss.

EDWIN ARNOLD.

“WHAT am I to do?” she sighed at last.

Disney was silent: a vague apprehension was taking hold of him. His conscience, the minute the thing was done, seemed to accuse him, whereas before he had felt so certain of being in the right. He began to wonder whether the true, the knightly thing to do would not have been to go quietly away the moment he felt himself beginning to care for Leone, and await the issue, trusting to her own conscientiousness to break the engagement, if she really cared nothing for Westmorland; but he had an answer ready for this too. She would never have gathered courage to take such a decisive step unsupported; she was so young, so distrustful of herself.

“Right and wrong be hanged,” he reflected fiercely, “all's fair in love and war. She is full of character, though still young; in a year's time both she and Westmorland would be miserable, if I had allowed it to go on. I never showed her the thing till she had first owned to having made a mess of it; then it was right to give her the strongest incentive to take decisive measures——”

"You don't speak," said Leo, heavily. "I asked you a question that nobody but myself could answer. I feel that."

So saying, she rose to her feet, and went and stood against a crumbling piece of masonry, leaning her arms upon it, and gazing sadly at the sun-speckled bracken glades under the trees.

Edgar thought he had never seen a more exquisite picture. He too rose, and followed her.

"I would do anything to help you," he said; adding in lower tones, "you know that."

"A girl who breaks her engagement is called a jilt," she said, absently. "My uncle used to say that a betrothal was almost as solemn a thing as marriage, and never to be lightly entered into. I wish Hope were here, to console me. She is so brave, and sees so clearly; she broke her engagement, because the man disappointed her, but she told me it was a terrible thing to do, and cost her great suffering."

The speaker could not see the cruel confusion which this speech caused her companion.

"Oh, Leo," he said, tremulously, "judge men gently; they have so many chances to be base which you sweet women, sheltered and protected, know nothing of. Such a man as Miss Merrion sent away might be saved by the love of a good woman."

"Yes?" she said, apathetically. "I don't know. I know nothing of men, or women, or of life at all; only that things go wrong so easily, all of a sudden, and—and—I want to do right, if only I know what right is."

She was trembling with the effort to keep back tears.

"Leo," said Edgar, softly, "you and I are both at the most difficult part of our lives—the time when we have to make a choice. Do you suppose any man or woman gets through it without suffering? If we did, the chances are that we never should be worth anything afterwards."

"Have you suffered?" she asked.

"Yes. I did wrong, and I had to take my punish-

ment. I think I am the better for it, but it was pretty bad at the time."

"When we were staying at Leaming, with Mr. Lyster," said Leo, thoughtfully, "we used to go up to the vicarage to see Mr. and Mrs. Wetherell."

Edgar winced, as at a painful touch.

"They are both very unhappy," she went on, "because last year they lost their only niece—Nellie; they were devoted to her, and she died of a decline. One day we had been to see her grave, and afterwards poor Mrs. Wetherell said, 'My dears, the doctors may call it what they like, but I know better: our Nellie died of a broken heart, and there's a man now alive that killed her.'"

"Good God!" exclaimed Edgar; and then, as she turned her startled eyes to his—"What right has anybody," he cried, "to say such a thing—to make such an accusation?"

"Hope told her she had no right to say so," replied his unconscious torturer. "She said no man had power to break a woman's heart, if only she were strong. Hope used to put flowers on her grave. What made me think of it was what you said just now—that nobody gets through this part of their life without suffering. You see, Hope, Nellie, you and I have all suffered. I hope dear Dick will not."

The wave of self-scorn which swept over Edgar at that moment was perhaps the healthiest emotion it had as yet been his to feel. It was a terrible revelation to hear of Nellie's death. Not for a moment had he imagined any permanent consequences to his flirtation with the pretty governess. For a few moments he loathed himself. At the same time, Hope's nature seemed to rise before him in a most lovely contrast to his own. Not a word had she spoken. He guessed quite well that she had purposely refrained from owning to the Wetherells that she had known Nellie in Colombo, lest she should be questioned concerning the man who had trifled with Nellie's feelings. He felt himself unfit to mate with any woman so good.

and beautiful as Leone. His penitence was as severe as it was novel.

"Leo," he said, huskily, "the terrible part of wrong-doing is that you can never get rid of it. You do one wrong, and it rears itself always ahead of you when you least expect it. Remember that!—If in this matter of your engagement you act against your own conscience, you will go on repenting all your days."

"Oh," she answered, firmly, "I have made up my mind. I must tell Major Westmorland. I cannot let it rest as it is." Then she laughed, a little hardly, crushing the prophecy in her hand. "It was extremely simple of me," she said, "I must have been infatuated with vanity to think that a man like Major Westmorland could love a girl like me! Why, he did not even know me!"

"You must, of course, allow me to contradict that," he said. "You are so intensely lovable that the difficulty is to conceive of any one having any other motive in the case. Perhaps—perhaps, after all, he does love you, Leone. If you thought so, would it change your feelings?"

"In one way: it would make me far more reluctant to give him pain. But I have been thinking it over, and I am more and more sure that it is not so. I have been thinking over all his words to me, as far as I can remember them,—for I was in such a whirl I can hardly recall what passed; but, as far as I am able to recollect, he never has said to me plainly, 'I love you!'—never once!"—here, without warning, her voice failed utterly, and she burst into tears.

"Go away," she managed to gasp to him. "Go away, please—don't look at me!"

He went, instantly; he had no right to kiss away her tears: in his present humiliation he felt as if he should never dare to ask for the right. Only upon one thing he was quite determined: that, before asking her anything, she should hear from his lips the

whole story of his love-affairs, unvarnished and complete.

"I owe her that," he thought.

For a time he walked up and down, out of sight of her, but in sight of the angle of wall which contained her.

When he came back, she was quite quiet and composed, and greeted him with a little smile.

"If you feel well enough," he said, "I think we ought to go in quest of Dick and our dinner."

"Yes, I will come," she answered : and in silence they walked back through the woods which they had before traversed so joyously.

In the midst of the fern he stopped for a moment, and took her hands.

"I want to tell you," he said, "how unspeakably you honour me by your confidence : you will know, without my telling you, how sacred it will be."

"Yes, thank you ; you are very kind," she replied, so spiritlessly, that he walked on in silence, feeling vaguely rebuked.

When they reached the inn, Richard had not come.

This seemed to make Leo uneasy and apprehensive. Not all the charm and coolness of the quaint oak parlour, nor the temptingness of the repast which Disney had ordered, could give her an appetite ; and, as soon as he had finished eating, she said, diffidently,

"It is too late to expect Dick now, is it not ?"

"I am afraid so ; there was only one train he could come by, and that should have brought him here a good deal more than an hour ago."

"Then I think, please, if you will not be offended, I should like to go home."

He explained with regret that this was impossible for nearly three hours to come. If they started at once, they would reach the station about twenty minutes late for the only early train.

He was so distressed about it that she tried to

reassure him, and soon, seeing there was no help for it, consented to go back with him and thoroughly explore the ruins. Gradually, as they walked back, he succeeded in comforting her, though by slow degrees. He knew that, when once their former footing of intimacy was rebuilt, they would be closer friends by far than before. At present it was but natural that the girl should be half-afraid of the unreserve into which she had been betrayed. He chose a beguiling subject for conversation—first his own childish reminiscences, then her own. She forgot her present troubles, by little and little, and told him of life at Sandwater Vicarage, and of her own delight at coming to live with Dick.

“I wish I had a sister or a mother,” she said, sadly. “Hope is the sister I would have chosen.”

They clambered up and down turret stairs, walked along the thick walls, and penetrated into the crypt. As they emerged from this last, the sound of a loud laugh, and the popping of a cork, warned them of the presence of the tourist, feeding, as is the manner of his kind, as close to consecrated walls as he possibly could.

They came out at the end of the north transept, and were full in view, suddenly, of the picnic party seated round a white tablecloth on the grass, with abundance of pigeon-pies, salad, and bottled stout spread out around them.

As they advanced, Leo stopped abruptly short, and some sudden uncomfortable feeling made her crimson to the roots of her hair. It was the Misses Openshaw who were giving the picnic in honour of their brother, home from America. Leo knew every one of their guests, and Mrs. Hancock was among them. There seemed to flash instantly across her mind the conviction of what these people must think of her appearance, at such a remote spot, with Captain Disney. Right through her the bolt seemed to quiver; she felt quite sick with the awkwardness of the moment.

"Oh," murmured she to Edgar, "what shall we do? I can't, I won't speak to them!"

"No need at all," he replied, hurriedly, smiling at the same moment, and doffing his hat to Mrs. Hancock, the only lady he knew. "How do you do, Mrs. Hancock?" he cried, raising his voice to show he did not mean to come any nearer. "Seen the doctor anywhere about?"

The lady so appealed to, vehemently shook her head, outraged propriety blazing in every lineament.

"If you see him, tell him we are going back to the inn," he replied, unblushingly. "Splendid day, isn't it? Quite like summer again! *Au revoir!*" with which he turned back within the abbey walls, Leo following him.

He saw that she was quite white, and trembling in every limb, but he hurried her on until they were far removed from the inopportune invaders of their solitude, till they had plunged deep into the tangles of the wood, and were once more entirely alone.

"That was unlucky!" he said, thoughtlessly, and then stopped short, awed, horrified by the unspeakable expression in his companion's eyes.

All idea of joking left him instantly.

He was quick enough, and great part of what lay behind her look was perfectly intelligible to him.

The eyes of these people had brought her suddenly back into the world of everyday life, out of the sweet enchantment in which Disney had enfolded her. The vague uneasiness with which she had consented to go off with him that morning, leaped suddenly into a full-grown consciousness of having done what was wrong. She had followed him as blindly as if he had mesmerised her, had confided in him utterly, had spoken to him with more unreserve than ever to any creature in her life before.

Why had she done it? She knew now. She loved this man, and she did not, and never could love Evelyn Westmorland.

The feeling uppermost in her was the consciousness of being utterly at his mercy.

Heedless and easy as Edgar was, he yet saw how cruelly selfish his conduct had been. For the pleasure of having her to himself for that day, and of securing her confidence, he had placed her in a position whose awkwardness can probably be gauged only by those who have lived in country towns.

That she had been seen alone with him at Marvaux would be all over the town to-morrow : then would follow the news of her broken engagement. In the present state of local feeling with regard to Leo, it could safely be predicted that judgment against her would be unhesitatingly unkind. No one would believe that the cancelling of the engagement came from her : that such a girl should voluntarily resign such a chance would be considered too far beyond the pale of probabilities.

Disapproval of the Fordes might even extend further, and injure Richard's growing practice. In a flash, Disney seemed to see all this, and that the place would be almost too hot to hold poor Leo for the next few months. And how could he help her ? It was surely not possible to speak to her of his love while still she was engaged to his friend. Supposing that her being "on with the new love," followed hard upon her being "off with the old," he could not see that this would raise her much in the eyes of the world. He had brought her to this, and now he was powerless to help her. A passion of love, sympathy, and regret shook him. If only she would come to him, what years of devoted love should atone for what she suffered now.

She did suffer. He could only guess at the shame and bitterness that almost burst her young heart. The expression of her mouth, as she walked beside him, forced tears to his eyes : and, at last, he could no longer contain his feelings.

"Oh, Leo," he said, "what have I done ? I have hurt you, whom I would die for ; I have distressed

you, when I would give all I have to comfort you !
Speak to me, please ! Your white face cuts right
into my heart !”

It might have been another woman who answered
him.

“Please take no blame to yourself, Captain Disney ;
that is all mine. I do not feel fit to enter into any
explanation now : the kindest thing that you can do
will be to take me straight home.”

“I will do it, and not say a word,” he replied,
shamefacedly. “I would do anything for you—
though perhaps I should not expect you to believe
that, now. If I live, I will find some way to prove
it to you.”

Not another word passed between them until they
reached the inn. And there, leaning over the gate,
looking impatiently down the road by which they
came, was Richard : and, at the expression of his face,
Leone, who had never before seen him really angry,
quailed.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

BROKEN DOWN.

Let me and my passionate love go by,
But speak to her all things holy and high,
Whatever happen to me !
Me and my harmful love go by :
But come to her waking, find her asleep,
Powers of the height, powers of the deep,
And comfort her, though I die !

TENNYSON.

A REASON for the strange reticence of the Merrions
about their addresses on their travels was partly given
by Mrs. Merrion, when she arrived in England with-
out her husband. The large firm in which he was

a partner was in difficulties, chiefly through his own imprudence.

Bertha came to Dalby Sands in a state of mind anything but conducive to enable her to bear the pressure of anxiety. There was nobody at leisure to pay her any attention. Mabel Thorpe was fast mending, but still very weak ; Guy and Wilf not yet allowed out of doors ; and Hope was dying.

It was pathetic to see the devotion with which Dr. Humbey laboured to save her life. Hardly any one durst approach him ; his state of mind was so agitated, so highly strung.

She seemed so passive—that was his chief distress ; she made no fight against the disease.

Bertha was terribly afraid of the infection, and there was no room for her in the house, so she went to the hotel : and for nearly three days awaited the summons to come and bid Hope good-bye. The only person she had to speak to was Gilbert Greville, who spent half his time on the doorstep at Marine Parade, making inquiries and delivering consignments of fruit and flowers.

The fact that, had she done her duty, Hope would never have been exposed to infection at all, did not seem to trouble Mrs. Frederic Merrion in the least. She was quite ready to believe that Guy's illness had never been so serious as people wanted to make out, and that it was nothing but Miss Thorpe's imprudence in allowing him to take cold that had caused him to develop a severe form of the complaint.

"Scarlatina is nothing, as children usually have it," she said, calmly. "Look at Wilf, he was scarcely ill at all. I don't think I shall keep Miss Thorpe. I give her forty pounds a year, and now that both the boys go to school, a nursery governess at twenty pounds a year would do just as well, and not be so opinionated. Think of the expense, too, of having her mother stopping in the house for a week ! One might be made of money."

Poor Bertha ! She felt that she was being ill-used

all round. It was particularly unfortunate that Hope should be too ill to be spoken to on business, just at the time when Frederic wanted her to advance the greater part of her fortune to him, to help him tide over his difficulties. She really felt as if life were not worth living during the days she unwillingly spent at the "nasty, inferior hotel."

But of all the persons then suffering, in mind or body, Major Westmorland's portion was perhaps least to be envied. He had never feared man, woman, or child before, but he did fear to show his father poor Leo's contrite, pleading, self-reproachful letter.

Yet, through all the taunts, the sneers, the grief he had to bear, he never lost sight of one strange fact,—a fact, he pondered over, and considered, and could not understand: namely, that when first he gathered the sense of that letter, when first he seized upon the truth, that he was dismissed—released—his heart gave a great bound, as though a weight were lifted from it, and he said aloud,

"Thank God!"

None the less, however, did he find his days in the dreary house almost intolerable.

Mr. Westmorland had raved much less than might have been expected; perhaps his great weakness warned him to avoid unnecessary exertion. He had merely remarked with a sneer, as he laid down the letter, that what had surprised him had been Miss Forde's entering upon the engagement at all, not her wishing to be quit of it; but as days wore on he seemed to sink into an absolute gloom of despondency, from which nothing roused him.

Lady Royd, his aunt, and her two daughters, were put off, at his request. The exertion of seeing company was too much for him, he said.

"The Westmorlands are quite crazy," was Lady Royd's remark, on receipt of Evelyn's somewhat incoherent letter. "His engagement is at an end, it seems. Just as well, I should say; she seems to have

been nobody, and really I don't think it at all advisable for Evelyn to marry, for I seriously believe he is out of his mind over the prophecy. And you may depend that, if it is decreed that the family is to become extinct, something will always happen to prevent his marriage," added her ladyship, who was a fatalist, and, as a member of the family, firmly believed in the Curse.

It was three days after the termination of his brief engagement, that Evelyn, on going into his father's room, saw him reading a letter from Mrs. Saxon.

"You can read that, if you like," he said tossing it towards his son.

Evelyn took it up and glanced down the first page.

"I am not at all inclined to be sympathetic over the Major's jilting," wrote Mrs. Saxon. "I never, as you know, considered the match suitable; It was too hurried and the girl too young. If Norchester gossip is to be trusted, Captain Disney seems to be at the bottom of it, and I think her better suited to him than to a man of deep character, like Evelyn. Her brother has sent her to Sandwater Vicarage, I hear, for a long visit, for the whole town is talking of nothing else. He, poor fellow, is terribly cut up about it, and greatly blames himself for not having taken better care of her. He is coming up to us for a week's shooting. I am afraid it is hardly wise of me, but Muriel seems to find it difficult to take any notice of anybody else; and I certainly do like him, and think he will have a career, if only we can get him to London.

"I quite agree with Major Westmorland's determination to take his dismissal as final.

"We are in really great trouble just now, so much so that I find it quite hard to write to you on other subjects. You remember Hope Merriion, Muriel's great friend, whom you admired so much? She is dying, they fear, of scarlet fever, caught from her little nephew, whom she was helping to nurse, at Dalby Sands. She took the complaint very severely, but they did not dread fatal consequences till two days

back, when she had a bad relapse : weak as she is, they seem to fear the worst. Muriel is wild to go to her, but I dare not let her. She has never had the fever, and she is my only one. I feel I should not be justified in running such a risk, short of absolute necessity."

Some minutes after laying down this letter, Evelyn became vaguely aware that his father was talking to him.

"Don't you even hear when you are spoken to?" cried the invalid, irritably.

"I did not hear—no!" said Evelyn, huskily.

"I really never met your equal for stupidity. I was talking of that lovely girl, Miss Merrion. There was a woman indeed! No foolish little doll, to change her mind fifty times a day, but a woman to live and die for! And for some trumpery reason you disliked her."

"I was under a misapprehension," said the Major, turning and pacing restlessly down the room. Then, his misery becoming suddenly too great for control, he dashed away out of the room, out of the house, into the garden, down the terraced slopes, never stopping until he stood by the rapid river-side, looking, half-maddened, on the quickly-flowing water.

It was too much, at last : this was the final blow ; if Hope died, there was no longer anything in the world to live for. Perhaps even now she was really dead—he thought of his dream at Leaming, of the blows which he had heard clash upon her coffin. He looked all around, at the scenes so familiar to him since boyhood, with a sensation of having done with them all. He was in the mood in which men lay violent hands on themselves. To his over-wrought imagination, he seemed to be weary of struggling against fate : the doom was stronger than he. The prophecy should be accomplished, and his must be the hand.

"Withouten Hope it shulde betyde."

Yes, without Hope. If she died, he would not live, he mutely swore : and the agony that shook him told him what was the intensity of his love.

A scuffling and a quick, asthmatical breathing near made him look round. It was Larrie, his dear old Skye, his barrack friend and companion, who, divining in his loving canine heart something of his master's trouble, had followed him with groans and panting down to the water-side, and now ran to him, placing his aged and faithful forepaws on his leg, and looking at him with dim eyes of exceeding affection and sympathy.

Into Evelyn's heart flashed the quick remembrance of the scene in the hall at Leaming the morning that Hope and Tom arranged the dogs, and old Larrie amongst them, in a circle. He thought of the joyous laughter, the sparkling health, the defiant pride of the girl as she stood—of her grace, her beauty, her matchless, unspeakable charm. And now she was dying, or dead. Oh, it was manifestly impossible! Hope cannot die!

He picked Larrie up, hugging him against his sore heart ; and, as he did so, a thought struck him like a spur, pricking him onwards.

“I will go and see,” he said to himself, “whether she is alive or no ; and if she is not. . . .”

He merely told his father he must go to London, and for once in his life regardless of his complaints at being left alone, he ordered the trap, and went straight off to the station to catch the up train.

Some years afterwards—or so it seemed to him—he was standing before the door of the house wherein she lay. There was no need to inquire the number : the straw in the road, the muffled knocker, told their own tale. As he knocked, a deathly sickness seemed to come over him. What hung upon this moment ! He dared not think.

When the door softly opened, he could scarcely control himself to pronounce her name.

“I am happy to tell you, sir, that Miss Merrion

was declared to be out of danger last night : she is as weak as it is possible to be, but conscious, and likely to do well."

He put out his hand against the wall to steady himself.

"That is—good news," he faltered.

"Yes, sir. Lady Caroline Loftus arrived yesterday from Ireland, and directly she was in the room, Miss Merrion took a turn for the better."

"I am much obliged to you. No—no name!" as she held a small tray for his card. "Good afternoon!" and he was gone.

Bowen—for Bowen it was—smiled grimly.

"You may not know my face, but I know yours, Major Westmorland," she soliloquised, as she gently closed the door.

CHAPTER XL.

THE CONVALESCENT HOME.

O heart, how fares it with thee now,
That thou shouldst fail from thy desire
Who scarcely darest to inquire,

"What is it makes me beat so low?"

Something it is which thou hast lost,
Some pleasure from thine early years.

TENNYSON.

HUMANLY speaking, Lady Caroline Loftus might be said to have saved Hope's life. It was she, it will be remembered, who took the girl to Ceylon when she went to spend the winter with her younger brother Herbert.

Since then, a sister-in-law in weak health and poor circumstances had claimed the loving and ready services of Lady Caroline, who had been in Ireland, and had not seen her favourite Hope since their voyage

home to England together. When she heard, however, of the illness of her beloved child, she had packed up at once, and hurried over as fast as boats and trains could take her.

She arrived just in time. Hope had allowed herself to slip so near to the shadowy land that it seemed as if a breath would be enough to extinguish the flickering flame of her life. The sudden appearance of the friend whom she loved so well just gave the impetus required—just aroused her, in her utter weakness, to conceive a faint wish not to die.

Lady Caroline was a handsome, dark-eyed woman, no longer young, though still attractive. A tragic romance lay behind in her past, and perhaps the true friendship shown to her at a critical time by Hope's mother had something to do with her warm affection for Hope herself. She was a woman of splendid vitality, and her presence seemed to transform the house. She devoted herself to both the invalids, Hope and Mabel, and under her cheery *régime* they gained rapidly in health and strength.

When it came to be a question of moving them, Lady Caroline had a plan to propose. Some friends of hers, going abroad for the winter, had made her the offer of their pretty cottage at Varling, a village near the Welsh hills. Servants and pony-carriage were all at her disposal until April, if she cared to have them.

She had scarcely contemplated accepting the offer until she came to Dalby Sands; but now it seemed to her that a winter of quiet and pure air, with good nursing and petting, was the very thing for the frail white-faced young creature whose face struck a nameless feeling of pain into her tender heart every time she looked at it.

Mabel should come too, for some weeks, until her health was firmly established, but she progressed far more satisfactorily than Hope, though the latter was now almost as determined to get well as the former could be.

The Frederic Merriions' circumstances were not in

a very enviable condition. For the next two or three years they would have to live very quietly, and retrench in every direction ; in fact, only Hope's generous loan enabled them to tide over the crisis. Her generosity left her with only a very small income for the present, and half of this she proposed to pay Bertha for the privilege of living with them and teaching little Adeline.

It was this apparently depressing state of things which was largely responsible for her greater eagerness to be quite strong again. She was to have a chance of being of use. She was to live with Bertha and teach Adeline. She did not like Bertha, and had always a special horror of instructing ; in this way did she long to emulate the self-abnegation of Mabel Thorpe.

Mabel herself was unconcernedly told by Mrs. Merrion that she should have no further occasion for her services ; and this was a subject of so much distress to Hope that, when Lady Caroline broached the idea of her cottage "on the Marches," she hailed it with acclamation. Caroline was much interested in anything in the shape of a romance, and meant to invite Arthur Strange also, for a week to her convalescent home, as she called it.

As soon, therefore, as Dr. Humbey—reluctantly, it must be admitted—allowed that Hope was well enough to travel, the three started with Bowen in attendance, and, after a night in London, arrived at Varling on an afternoon of soft sunshine at the beginning of November, when all the trees on all the hills were in their later stage of decaying splendour.

They were all in a mood to find the place pretty, but it outran their expectations. It was snug, well-built, well-warmed. It stood high, but was placed cosily. The drawing-room had a south aspect, with a window in the western wall, through which the setting of the sun beyond the "far blue hills" was distinctly visible. The two maids were amiable and friendly, and the garden-boy, who on occasion donned

livery and drove the pony, met them with broad smiles of welcome. Everything that the kind owners could think of for their comfort had been done: the really good piano was in tune, as Lady Caroline delightedly discovered, and the best families in the neighbourhood had been asked to call upon them, lest they should feel their rural seclusion somewhat too much of a good thing.

This last item was joyful news for the hostess, who was eminently sociable and by no means fond of solitude. Hope was not quite so charmed. She felt inclined to remain for a time "the world forgetting, by the world forgot."

She had a new and curious disinclination to see people—a feeling which Lady Caroline was quite determined to dissipate, before it grew too strong.

She knew quite well that something had gone wrong with Hope, and when first she saw her had wondered, with much dismay, whether she could possibly be regretting her break with Disney. This idea was dispelled soon, when the girl, as if in relief at pouring out her heart to some one who had known the story, told her of the shock it had been to hear of Nellie Wetherell's death, and of her seeing her grave at Leaming. By the way she alluded to the whole affair, her astute friend knew well that her only feeling was thankfulness at being free of the engagement, shame at having entered into it.

She made no attempt to force her confidence, knowing quite well that, if Hope meant to tell her, she would do so without being urged, and that, if she had decided not to, she would not change her decision.

She had an idea that Bowen knew, an idea acquired she scarcely knew how. But even had she felt inclined to question the maid, which was far from being the case, she felt that it would be worse than useless; Bowen would guard her young mistress's secret at any cost. Since the danger of losing her, the woman's love was touching in its devotion. She

watched her jealously, detecting the first signs of fatigue, regular as a machine with tonics and beef-tea, and ubiquitous in halls and passages, armed with wraps. She loved Lady Caroline, because Lady Caroline loved Hope, and would do anything for her.

"Maiden ladies living in the country seem to me to lead a most luxurious life!" cried Hope, merrily, one morning as she sat in the drawing-room eating her soup, while Lady Caroline wrote letters, and Mabel trimmed herself a hat.

"They don't all live in Convalescent Homes," laughed Mabel.

"Ah, no! But what a bad training this is for me, now that I am just starting on my new way of life," said Hope, gravely. "This is no preparation for turning and dyeing my gowns, riding in omnibuses, and going third class everywhere. Why do you look so mournfully at me, Mabel?"

"I can't fancy you, somehow! I wonder if you have counted the cost of going third class everywhere."

"Why should I mind?" said Hope, intrepidly. "I believe you think much more seriously of it than I do!"

"Of course," was Mabel's quiet answer, "because I know from experience the meaning of 'going third class everywhere,' and you don't. Daughters of rich men fear poverty much less than daughters of poor men, just simply because they don't know what they are talking of."

"Very sensible," observed Lady Caroline, from her writing-table. "Hope—don't talk nonsense!"

"It's not in the least nonsense," maintained Hope, in high dudgeon. "I know quite well what it means. You give one and elevenpence halfpenny for your gloves, and if you go to the theatre, you go in your hat, and you live in West Kensington and dine early. I sha'n't mind any of that."

Mabel laughed again.

"Nobody could make you realise it," she said,

with an air of superior knowledge which provoked Hope beyond measure.

"Wait till you have seen me try ; I will make you both own that you misjudge me !" she cried. "If Carina were not so foolish about my not being strong yet, I would start for London to-morrow, to help Bertha get into her new house !"

"I should," said Lady Caroline, without turning round. "You look just about fit to be carrying furniture about. Dear me !" suddenly. "We have a visitor ! The vicar of the parish is evidently about to leave his card !"

As she spoke, a slight, clerical-looking figure passed the window, and Mabel, looking up, gave a cry, and started to her feet.

"Oh, Lady Caroline ! It is Arthur !"

"What !" Her ladyship faced round, and gave a keen look into the blushing, transfigured face.

"Well, my dear, you had better go and let in Mr. Strange ; and if by any chance you should have anything of a private nature to say to him, there is the dining-room, you know."

Mabel, after one rapturous look at Hope, bounded to the door.

"I can't understand it !" she panted. "How can he afford the time or the money to come here ?" and she was gone, closing the door behind her.

The house was so still that they could not help hearing the quick accents of the masculine voice, and the girl's sobbing cry of "Arthur !"

Then the dining-room door was heard to shut, and silence reigned.

Hope lay on her sofa with closed eyes. She was not strong enough to bear much emotion, and a nameless desolation had crept over her as she heard that thrilling cry.

How beautiful to love like that !

She almost wished that it had been in her power to give Gilbert Greville what he craved.

He had begged so hard to see her before she

left Dalby Sands, but she had been firm in her refusal.

She had written to him a little note of gratitude for his gifts of flowers, and his great kindness during her illness : a note of what Mrs. Browning calls "gelid sweetness."

It left no loophole for any man, however besotted, to dream the writer could be in love with him. She liked him too well to trifle with him. She had no love in her heart, she told herself ; but the face of Mabel Thorpe, as she caught sight of her lover, seemed to fill Hope with a tremulous unrest which caused tears to gather in the large eyes, larger now than ever in the wan little face.

"Poor child !" said Carina, tenderly.

She meant Mabel, not Hope.

"She looked so pleased, so transformed, when she caught sight of his face, she was really pretty at that moment," she went on.

As she spoke, the dining-room door was vehemently thrown open, flying steps crossed the hall, and Mabel Thorpe burst in, in tears, rushed across the room, cast herself on her knees by Hope's sofa, flung her arms about her, and, burying her face in her neck, sobbed aloud.

"Mercy on me ! What's to do now ?" cried Lady Caroline, addressing her highly pardonable inquiry to the young priest who followed Mabel, and stood, half uncertainly, in the doorway.

His illumined expression seemed to show that the "to-do" was of no woeful origin ; but his voice was apparently not perfectly under control, for he made more than one ineffectual effort to speak, and after all it was Mabel who first found her voice.

What she said was at first so entirely incoherent that nothing could be gathered from it except that she was in a state of extravagant gratitude to Hope for something she had done.

Hope, also in tears, for she was very weak, was disclaiming, and saying there was nothing to thank

her for ; till Lady Caroline, with firmness, went up to the inarticulate pair and drew Mabel away.

"My dear child, you must consider Hope, she is not at all strong yet ! Now, do tell us what it is."

"I am very sorry to take it so badly," gasped Mabel, who was trembling. "I am ridiculous, I know, but it seems to me that joy is harder to take quietly than grief ! It is all through Hope ; God will make her happy, I know, as happy as I am now, because she thought of me, felt for me, helped me so !"

"Oh, Mabel, indeed you make me feel ashamed, dear," cried Hope, deprecatingly. "I did nothing, nothing ! I only just mentioned you to Molly, to Mr. Lyster ! It is he alone who should be thanked."

"He told me," said Arthur, speaking for the first time, "that he did it for your sake."

Hope held out her hand.

"I am very glad to know you ; I think you a most fortunate man," she said.

"Fortunate ! you are right," he replied, all his heart in his eyes as they rested on Mabel. "Now that I can offer her a home, I have nothing to wish for."

"Now tell us all about it, sensibly," interrupted Lady Caroline, "for I am completely in the dark. There never was a more bewildered woman than I am at this moment ! What has happened ? what has Mr. Lyster done for Hope's sake ?"

Then Arthur Strange told his story. He had been four days at Leaming, staying with Mollie, and liked him, Mr. Wetherell, and the parish and everything. It was arranged that he was to take sole charge at Christmas whilst Mr. and Mrs. Wetherell went south, to try and re-establish the old man's health.

"And he wants me to bring my wife, and to live at the vicarage whilst we are getting our home ready," he said, his eyes fixed upon the usually self-possessed Mabel, who was childishly hiding her face against Lady Caroline.

This was quick work. It left Mabel not much more than a month in which to make her preparations

for matrimony, and Arthur said her mother thought she ought to come home in a week at latest.

Hope and Lady Caroline threw themselves into all the plans with eager interest. To Mabel, this sudden realisation of all her most unlikely dreams seemed too good to be true. It took a long, long *tête-à-tête* with her Arthur to in any degree compose her agitation.

Hope wrote a most grateful and affectionate letter to Mollie, telling him that to him she owed one of the purest moments of happiness that her life had ever known. He replied that young Strange was a splendid fellow, and it was a pleasure to be able to help him.

His letter was long and chatty, and told of all the little pieces of news which he thought might interest her. One bit of intelligence which was included in it was indeed news, and contained food for much reflection. It had been, for some reason known to herself, excluded carefully from Muriel's letters. This was the announcement of the breaking of Evelyn's engagement.

CHAPTER XLI.

IN THE MUDDY LANES.

Should I fear to greet my friend,
Or to say, "Forgive the wrong,"
Or to ask her, "Take me, sweet,
To the regions of thy rest?"

TENNYSON.

It had rained for three days almost without intermission, and to Evelyn Westmorland it seemed as if it never would stop.

He stood before the hall window with Larrie in his arms, gazing down the valley at the swollen, swirling waters of the Bourne, as it rushed past, heavy

and dark with peat washed down from the hills. The old butler was laying lunch in the subdued and melancholy manner in which it seemed the fashion to do everything at Feverell.

Near a roaring fire, old Mr. Westmorland reclined on his invalid couch. His paralysis was increasing slowly but surely, and, though he had speedily recovered his full powers of articulation, his lower limbs seemed to become weaker every day. With his speech, his features had righted themselves, but his countenance was so bloodless, and his face so thin and sharp, that it looked like an ivory mask.

The hall was very hot—too hot, for the day was mild, though damp; yet the couch was drawn as close to the chimney-corner as it could conveniently be placed. On a table near lay a heap of books and periodicals—the old favourites of this man of letters: Shelley, Keats, the Essays of Elia, Dryden, and Milton's prose. With these, a heap of latter-day and ephemeral celebrities, archæological pamphlets, reviews, political *brochures*.

All of them failed to interest now. On the chiselled face was a strange, somewhat horrible look—the look of a man who has yielded himself a slave to superstition. He had reached the lowest depth of fatalism: resentment against Evelyn was dying out—pity at his hard lot was taking its place. What use to seek to frustrate the workings of Fate? What were he and his son but victims—passive victims—of the wrong done by their ancestors in remote generations? How explain Evelyn's curious lack of a desire for marriage, but by the fact that his destiny was too strong for him?

To the old man's diseased imagination, the Curse seemed to have been working traceably for years and years up to this very point.

This remote visiting of the sins of the fathers upon the children had been discovered, he reflected, long ages ago by those wise old Greeks, who seemed to discern all truth, howsoever darkly.

“What meant the woes on Tantalus entailed,
Or the dark sorrows of the line of Thebes?
Fictions in fact, but in their substance truths,
Tremendous truths!”

Mr. Westmorland had thought out the whole tragedy in his own mind, and had decided that his son would die on the first of March, leaving only himself to fade slowly out of existence in the empty halls of this old Chase, which, three generations back, had been the gayest, most open house in the county.

On this pleasing consummation his mind loved to dwell, and Evelyn was powerless to divert his thoughts. He could not even induce him to leave home, though his doctor strongly urged him to go to Malvern for the strengthening of his limbs. Evelyn had come to the conclusion that the only thing to do was to stay quietly at home until the fatal date was past. If the horrors of anticipation did not kill his father, he might perhaps take a turn for the better afterwards.

The room was very quiet. The dogs, overpowered by heat, lay extended on the floor in various directions: old Larrie's asthmatical cough alone broke the silence.

At last Mr. Westmorland spoke.

“I wish to goodness you would take that brute out of the room, Evelyn! How often am I to tell you that I cannot endure the noise he makes?”

“It's the damp,” said Evelyn, slowly, turning from the window like one awakened from a dream, and caressing the terrier's head.

“I must request that you turn him out of the room,” fretted the invalid.

“I'm going myself to the stables. The rain has stopped. I'll ride over to Winstanton this afternoon, and tell the vet. to give me something for his cough.”

He went out, wandered down the passages to the housekeeper's room, and left Larrie in the loving care of Mrs. Middleton, the old housekeeper; then, turning up his coat-collar, and thrusting a cloth cap on his

short, black locks, he repaired to the stables to order his horse.

Of late he seemed to care to ride only one horse, the black hunter which had carried Hope across Limmerdale.

Mounted on this animal, he started for Winstanton directly after lunch.

"I suppose you won't be back before night?" snapped his father as he took leave.

"I will be as quick as I can; I have not been out for three days, you know. If I see Hammond (the agent), shall I send him up to keep you company?"

"Certainly not. I won't see him."

"Well, I must look sharp, I suppose; good-bye. You have all you want?"

No answer. Evelyn departed, telling Farren, who was going upstairs, to look in upon the master at frequent intervals.

It was not raining: the clouds were higher and of a more broken description, though still the whole sky was grey.

December was advancing, and the leaves were all down: the country was dreary and desolate.

The Major's meditations, when alone, were always on one subject, and to-day was no exception to the rule. He thought continually of Hope, and of the fatal misunderstanding between them, and of her illness, and, more than all, of the day on the moors together, when it had been his privilege to serve her.

He wondered what she was doing now, wearying his brain with conjectures as to her whereabouts. A desire had had possession of his soul ever since his first meeting with Disney, and discovery of the hateful injustice he had done her. This was, for once to see her, face to face, and ask her to forgive him.

Would it be an unwarrantable intrusion—a liberty which she might resent, were he to ascertain her address, and go to her for this purpose? She might refuse to see him.

He had thought of writing, and in fact had more

than once started a letter to her : but the aspect of his penitence on paper seemed so bare and meagre, compared with the mighty flood of his remorseful grief, that he dared not risk it. No lady, under the circumstances, could well do less or more than to return a formal, polite, and stereotyped assurance of forgiveness, which he felt would be as a stone to his hungry heart, and not the bread for which he craved.

Some few details of the earlier stages of her convalescence, he had gathered from Mrs. Saxon's letters to his father ; but the Saxons had gone to Italy in the beginning of November, and since then he had heard nothing.

He was beginning to feel that this absence of tidings was intolerable.

Every now and then, as he dragged through the weary hours at Feverell, the longing to see her became so strong as to be absolute torture. He would sit by the hour together in a reverie, recalling her words, her looks, her ways. The scent of violets always helped him to realise her, and he had manifested an interest in the culture of Parma violets under glass, which had delighted and surprised the head gardener. He had now a little bunch of them in his button-hole ; and all the way to Winstanton he was thinking of her, always of her, till his imagination grew bold, and he wove an airy castle in which she not only forgave him, but admitted him to her friendship ; and he might have perhaps soared beyond even these heights, had he not arrived at the veterinary surgeon's door.

The short winter's day was waning as he turned homewards. A red light tinged the grey vapour on the western horizon. The country seemed so lonely and mournful that his heart sank within him, as all alone he rode through the muddy lanes. Even the sound of wheels in front of him, hidden by a turn in the high hedges, was welcome. Soon he came in sight of a basket pony-carriage, trotting briskly along, driven by a lady, with another lady at her side, and a small solemn groom in livery perched up behind.

He eyed them keenly as he rode up, wondering who they were, for most of the residents in the neighbourhood were of course known to him by sight ; but certainly the lady driving was a stranger, for he could see her profile as she turned smiling to her companion. She seemed to tell her to look at the red light in the west, for the other, who was much muffled in furs, raised herself a little, and something in the way she moved her head made the Major start ridiculously : for he thought it was like Hope Merriion.

His mind was always so full of her that such a fancy was most natural. Yet, as he quickly gained upon the stout pony, he could not resist turning to look again at this unknown girl. The unwonted sound of horse's hoofs, and the sight of a tall horse and rider passing in the lane, made her glance round.

Their eyes met, and it seemed to Evelyn as if the atmosphere of the globe had suddenly become impossible to breathe ; as if the murky fields and leafless trees whirled round in a mystic dance. His horse had carried him a good way past the little chaise before he recovered enough to pull up and turn round.

Yes, it was she—his Lady.

Hope had made some sort of exclamation which caused Lady Caroline to check the pony, while gazing in a puzzled way at the girl's face, which seemed to have caught the reflection of the sky and to flame with sudden red.

“What a magnificent man ! Do you know him ?” murmured she, as he came towards them ; and Hope with, as it seemed to her, the last particle of force in her body, replied in stifled tones :

“It is Major Westmorland.”

To his own great satisfaction and astonishment, he found himself capable of raising his cap, and saying,

“How do you do ?”

Hope bowed—yes ! it was true.

She looked confused, certainly, but she did not cut him, nor even show any very obvious displeasure at

sight of him. She found voice to murmur, very low, "Lady Caroline Loftus." He heard it; he thought her faintest whisper would have power to arouse him from sleep or death. He bowed to the keen-eyed lady, whose ready speech at once filled in the thrilling pause.

"Major Westmorland! I have often heard of you. I am very pleased to meet you. Are you staying in this part of the world?"

"My home is here," he answered, hearing the hammering of his own heart more plainly than his words. "I live at Feverell—about four miles from this. Are *you* staying hereabouts?"

"Yes; we are wintering together, Miss Merrion and I, at Varling."

"With the Gardiners? I thought they were abroad."

"They have given me the use of their house."

It was incredible; the tumult of his mind augmented.

Not only was he at this moment seeing and addressing her, but she was fixed within a few miles of him. What had he done to deserve such happiness as this?

He devoured her with his eyes—the white face, the thin cheeks, the sad mouth.

"I hope you are feeling better?" he said, stiffly.

"She is mending most satisfactorily," answered Lady Caroline for her, "but I dare not risk keeping her out any longer in this damp. We are just going home to tea: will you come on with us and have some? It is such a cheerless evening!"

Would he come?

He never hesitated. For the first time he forgot his father, forgot his promise to be home early, forgot everything in the universe except the one fact that he was riding beside Hope—that he was in her presence. So far this was enough, if not too much, of bliss.

It was strange how, once free of the burden of his engagement to Leo, all idea of her seemed to have

left his mind. She might as well have never existed, for all he thought of her now.

But Hope wondered if he was grieving: he looked so worn and depressed. As he walked the great horse beside them, replying gravely and sparely to Carina's easy, bright talk, she was speculating as to how hard the blow had fallen: and whether he was heart-broken.

Bowen, who was waiting somewhat anxiously for Miss Merrion's return, smiled within herself as she saw the large outline of the Major and his horse loom up in the twilight.

The usually slow Evelyn had dismounted in an instant to-night, in time to help Hope out of the pony-carriage.

It seemed impossible to believe that it was really he himself: across his memory flashed the recollection of his carrying her over the stream, in the pelting thunder rain. How wee her hand seemed in his own!

As she stood on the threshold, she turned her face up to him, and asked softly,

"Is that the horse I rode?" and he answered gently,

"Yes."

There seemed nothing of her when Bowen had carried away the heavy furs which enveloped her, and the absence of her hat revealed a crop of short, silky curls all over her head. The tears started to his eyes, as she sat down in the nook of a big, cosy sofa, and leaned back as though tired out.

"You are not strong," he said, in tones gruff with concealed feeling.

"Oh, she is getting on with great strides," cried Lady Caroline, lying aside her own furs, and seating herself at the gipsy tea-table. "If I could only get her to sleep at nights, I should be quite happy. I take her into the open air as much as possible."

Evelyn stood erect on the fur hearth-rug, looking out with a nameless enjoyment at the bright, attractive room full of feminine trifles. How seductive a thing was afternoon tea, after the dreary chill out-

side ! How it warmed the solitary fellow's heart to be here—here, with Hope, who was not unkind—was not even cold to him. He had the unspeakable honour of arranging, by Lady Caroline's request, a small table at Miss Merrion's elbow, and placing her cup and plate thereon ; but he noticed that she scarcely ate a mouthful.

Lady Caroline talked so much, and so naturally, that he had time to collect himself and steady his nerves, and was able to join quite rationally in the talk, when called upon to do so.

"What is it smells so deliciously ?" cried she. "Just like violets ! I could declare there were violets in the room."

"They are in my coat," said he.

"Oh ! So they are ! How delicious ! Hope, was it not only yesterday we were longing for violets ? There are none to be had in Winstanton, for love or money."

"I grow them at Feverell," he eagerly broke in. "I will send you as many as you like, if you will accept them. In the meantime, will you object to these ? They are rather faded, I'm afraid, but they will soon freshen up in water."

Putting down his tea-cup on the mantelpiece, he detached the flowers from his button-hole, and laid them by Lady Caroline's plate. Hope thought no action of his had ever so become him. Timidly she allowed her eyes to rest upon him, as he received thanks from her ladyship : and the result of her scrutiny was puzzling.

He looked ill, to her, who had seen him before his unlucky engagement. She remembered how entirely vigorous and healthy she had thought him—what a robust specimen of manhood. Now there was an indescribable change, which, by some mysterious means, had lent an added delicacy to the features, a depth to the eyes, which had not before been there. How much would she have given to know his thoughts : if he was glad to be there, whether his

mood towards herself was bitter, as on the starlight night in the garden, or gentle, as when he had held her hand and soothed her in the charcoal-burner's hut. Ah, what a keen flood of memories the sight of him called into being! The black, wild, stormy moor was present to her imagination, and the picture of that dark head as she had seen it last, the rain drenching it as it moved beside her horse, its outline growing ever less distinct in the gathering night; and the

“Resolute shoulders, each butting away
The haze, as some bluff river headland its spray.”

Then, for a brief hour in that perilous time, these two had cast away convention, and faced each other, man and woman, drawn together by the pressure of a common danger. Could this quiet polished gentleman, with his subdued voice and gentle manner, be the man who had forcibly wrapped her in his coat, who had gazed on her opening eyes with an expression in his own which had well-nigh stopped the beating of her heart, who had caught her in his arms and cried, “I am stronger than you, and I will make you do it!” Ah! it could not come over again. It had required much to call the fire from the flint. Now it was, to all appearance, cold again.

That sharp striking together of their two bare souls could not repeat itself, she reflected, sadly, and then she wondered why such reflections should sadden her. Was it because, amidst so much that was heartless, so much that seemed wasted in her life, there had flashed suddenly upon her soul a revelation of light—a perception of that great strength of a strong man which all women unconsciously desire to know?

It was almost as though some huge flood had furiously driven her against a giant rock, and by its very violence held her there so that she could feel its massive strength; but, as the tempestuous waves abated, she had fallen away again, and now lay on

the sands below, safe from storm, but out of reach of the mighty rock which had befriended her.

So dreamed the girl, gazing absently into the clear fire, till startled from her reverie by what Lady Caroline was saying as she chatted gaily on :

"I had another patient in my convalescent home," she said, "a Miss Thorpe. She has gone home to make ready for her wedding. There is quite an epidemic of marrying and giving in marriage just now. Miss Merrion heard only this morning from a friend of hers that she is engaged. By-the-by, you must have met her, she was at Leaming—a Miss Forde ! And the curious thing is that she is to marry a man that we knew in Colombo—a Captain Disney !"

So blithely, Lady Caroline, unknowing what a hornet's nest she was putting her hand into. Hope could not have looked at Westmorland had her life depended upon it. Had she done so, she would have seen that he was quietly smiling.

"Disney is a friend of mine : we were in the same regiment," she heard him saying composedly : and then, Lady Caroline proceeding to ply him with questions, he answered them all unconcernedly, showing not the slightest confusion, even when asked if he liked Miss Forde.

Hope could hardly believe her ears.

He did not make a very long visit ; his father would be missing him, he said.

"You may have heard how ill he has been," he added to Hope.

As soon as he was gone, Lady Caroline fell into raptures over him. So unlike the usual run of young men !

"I did like that simple, manly way in which he said his father would be missing him. I am charmed to think he is within reach," said she, sniffing at her violets with great satisfaction. "As you know, it is always to my taste to have a nice young man available," she added, laughing. "And he lives with his

father and takes care of him ! How particularly picturesque of him ! But you never told me how handsome and well-mannered he is ! You never described him in the least."

Hope gave no answer. She herself was wondering at Evelyn's beauty and courtesy. Surely he was changed from the morose, discontented fellow she remembered ? What a strange being he must be ! His *fiancée* had coolly thrown him over only a month or two ago and was now going to marry another man ; yet she had never seen him so interesting.

"The Major looks a trifle different to-night, to what he did last time I see him," remarked Bowen, with grim humour, when Miss Merrion came up to dress for dinner.

"When was that ?" asked Hope, absently thinking of Leaming.

"On the doorstep of Marine Parade, Dalby Sands, which heaven be thanked we're out of, and I hope never to set foot in no more."

"Bowen, you must be dreaming ! You saw Major Westmorland at Dalby Sands ? What are you thinking of ?"

"Either him or his ghostie come to inquire how you was, miss, for I answered the doormyself. The day Dr. Humbey said you'd pull through, 'twas. 'No, no name,' says he, not recognising me, as was natural. But I think I know Major Westmorland when I see him."

CHAPTER XLII.

ABSOLUTION.

"May God judge me so,"
 He said at last.—"I came convicted here,
 And humbled sorely, if not enough. I came,
 Because this woman, from her crystal soul
 Had shown me something which a man calls light :
 Because, too, formerly, I sinned by her
 As then and ever since I have, by God,
 Through arrogance of nature—though I loved
 Whom best, I need not say, since that is writ
 Too plainly in the book of my misdeeds :
 And thus I came here to abase myself,
 And fasten, kneeling, on her regent brows
 A garland which I startled thence one day
 Of her beautiful June-youth."

E. B. BROWNING.

It was seven o'clock when Evelyn rode into the stable yard : and when, twenty minutes later, he hurried into the little blue drawing-room, as they called it, his father sat there in awful state, his aspect giving warning of stormy weather.

"I am glad the veterinary surgeon's conversation was so enthralling," was his pleasant beginning ; "but on a balmy night like this, one doubtless likes to linger out of doors, especially when there is nobody but a cross old man to come home to."

"Ah !" said Evelyn, so cheerily that his father looked suddenly up at him, "I was better employed than in talking to the vet. or dawdling about in the mist. I met friends, and have been out to tea."

"Oh, indeed !"

This going out to tea was so unlike Evelyn's usual proceedings, that Mr. Westmorland's flow of com-

plaint was quite checked, and he waited in silence to hear more.

"Somebody that I never expected to see," went on his son, "and a great favourite of yours, father. Miss Merrion."

"Miss Merrion! What in the world is she doing here?"

The Major explained, leaning his broad back against the mantelpiece, and basking in the warmth.

"And, please, father, I want you to ask them to dinner," was his astounding conclusion.

"What next, I wonder? I am totally unfit to see company. And you declared to me once that you had special reasons for disliking Miss Merrion."

"Yes, that was a mistake," said Evelyn, frankly. "I behaved very badly: I was very rude. You see, I want to show them a little civility, just as a sort of apology. I'll write the note to Lady Caroline myself—you sha'n't be bothered: and you will enjoy talking to her, it will cheer you up. She has been everywhere, and plays beautifully."

"Well, I don't know what to make of you; but I suppose you must have your way, as usual," was the peevish and conspicuously unjust reply, "only they must put up with me as I am; I am in no mood to entertain guests."

"Dinner is served," said the butler.

As soon as he could escape from table, Evelyn went and wrote his invitation. It seemed to him as if the burning desire to speak to Hope, to crave her pardon, would consume him unless speedily satisfied. How strange it had seemed to stand in the same room with her, talking of ordinary subjects, like any chance acquaintance meeting unexpectedly: when under the smooth surface there throbbed and thrilled such an ocean of passion and tenderness and regret.

Beyond reconciliation he would not, however, allow his winged thoughts to soar.

Having composed his note, he went to tell a man to carry it, and then down to the head gardener's

lodge, rousing him from supper in the bosom of his family to proceed to the frames and gather violets with a lavish hand.

The invitation was for Thursday, this being Monday, and Evelyn added.

"As we feel sure the night air is not good for Miss Merrion, we shall take the liberty of sending the brougham to fetch you. You said you could not get violets in Winstanton, so I am venturing to ask you to accept a few, with my kind regards to you and Miss Merrion."

"You must wait for an answer," said Evelyn to his messenger: and spent the interval between his going and returning in a state of trepidation which aroused his own scorn. He could scarcely believe his good fortune when he held Lady Caroline's note of cordial acceptance in his hand.

The retainers at Feverell thought that the young master was out of his senses when the day arrived, so fidgety and exacting was he over the preparations.

Fires roared the whole day in the large drawing-room and in the dining-room, both rooms being seldom used by the two men, and Evelyn being terribly afraid lest his fragile little love should take a chill.

He had spent the intervening days chiefly in riding about the neighbouring lanes in pursuit of the Varling pony-carriage, but had not had the good fortune to encounter it. His suspense made him so restless that he was a burden to himself and all around him.

He insisted on the production of all the antique silver table decorations, "just as if it was a dinner-party of eighteen," as the old butler somewhat crossly remarked. He devastated the conservatory to try to produce floral effects such as he had seen at Hesselburgh, and laboured long with Mrs. Middleton, in the seclusion of her sitting-room, to arrange the priceless vases with something approaching an artistic result.

"Bless his heart, I ain't seen him so interested in anything since he was a boy," said the old lady

to Farren. "Is the ladies that's coming young?"

"Miss Merrion's a beauty," replied Farren, "but I never noticed as he was sweet upon her, myself."

"I wish he might be; it seems a shame for such as him to be single, don't it?" said Mrs. Middleton, sympathetically.

The Major was dressed and downstairs more than half an hour before the ladies could possibly arrive. When his father was wheeled into the room, he was whistling a tune, and making old Larrie dance to it, holding him by his fore paws.

When at last the bell was heard, he sobered instantly. His fictitious gaiety ceased, and his fears got the better of him.

He stood up, grave and still, counting his own heart-beats till the door was seen to open, and Lady Caroline rustled in, looking charming in black lace and poinsettias.

For just one awful moment he thought she was alone; but, as he started forward with the inquiry on his lips, Miss Merrion came slowly in, and walked up the long room.

She did not seem to see him, going straight to his father's invalid chair.

He had never seen her so stately, or so beautiful. The childish creature, with her soft curls, who had sat on the sofa in the firelight at Varling, seemed to have vanished utterly.

She was in grey, pale, pearl grey, with a long train. There was a dash of deep, poppy-red somewhere about her, which seemed to make her glow and sparkle like the deep heart of a rose.

She wore just a faint smile as she saluted her host, thanked him for his inquiries after her health, and assured him that she was better.

"You find me a sad cripple," he said, with a sigh, "unable even to rise and greet my Queen of Beauty, but a sight of you is better than any amount of doctor's stuff; I may recover, now that you have deigned to visit me."

"You retain all your power of pretty speaking," she answered, with a somewhat grave smile; and then she turned slowly, and as it seemed haughtily, to Evelyn, and gave him her hand.

"It is good of you to come," he faltered, terribly disconcerted by this change, "good of you to have compassion on us in our loneliness."

"Lady Caroline likes going out," she answered, coldly, as she took the seat he offered; and both accent and manner conveyed to his heavy heart the miserable impression that she had not wished to come.

It seemed to strike him suddenly mute. How could he make conversation under the circumstances? All his faculties were centred on this terrible, unlooked-for turn of affairs. In what a fool's Paradise had he been living during the last few days! He had imagined that proud Hope Merriam would consent to be friends with a man who had as good as told her that he declined to associate with such as she. Madness, folly, and detestable presumption! He might have seen how impossible was such an idea. Could she know, or guess at, his long and bitter repentance, or have any idea of his remorse?

Often, in thought, he had imagined himself pleading to her, and had fancied her angry, indignant, as when she said she hated him, or kind and yielding as he had thought her at Varling. Never once had he forecast this civil calm which seemed to weigh him down; to "front unuttered words, and say them nay;" to leave him helpless and hopeless, without pardon and without excuse.

He recovered himself in a minute or two, enough to obey Lady Caroline's smiling invitation, and go and seat himself beside her.

"You see, I have some of your violets," she said; "our cottage is fragrant with them."

He said, vaguely, that he was glad; but failed to find any more original reply. It was as if his heart must burst at the gulf which had suddenly opened

between himself and Hope. The announcement of dinner at the moment was a sort of relief. It gave him something definite to do in the way of wheeling his father's chair down the corridor into the dining-room.

Mr. Westmorland was a charming host ; never seen, in fact, quite to perfection but when he was entertaining in his own house. He seemed exactly to match its heavy, massive antiquity ; to be a fit lord of docile, perfectly-trained, noiseless servants. Lady Caroline was profoundly impressed by the whole *mise-en-scène*—the haunch and the game, all reared and killed on the estate ; the rare old wine, laid down by ancestral Westmorlands in those very cellars ; the great deer-hounds basking on the hearth ; the aristocratic father and his handsome son. She could not help fancying that Hope was impressed too : and began to wonder whether, after all, little Adeline would have much of her aunt's instruction.

Mr. Westmorland really enjoyed his visitors, as Evelyn had been sure he would, when they were there. He was animated and interesting—a different creature from the peevish, venomous old man who was Evelyn's daily companion.

The Major was always conspicuously silent in his father's presence. It was as though the sparkling current of small talk froze his own tongue. Lady Caroline, however, saved him the trouble of speaking much ; she was a chatter-box, and liked nothing better than a good audience. She rattled away merrily at his side, while he strove desperately to give attention enough to her to enable him to say yes and no at the right time, while all the while his face, turned towards his left, was longing ever to turn to his right, where Hope sat. He felt, rather than saw, that she never looked his way unless pointedly appealed to by Lady Caroline. She was giving all her attention to his father.

His sufferings grew and grew as the dinner progressed. How had he looked forward to this evening

—counted the minutes during the days that preceded it, wearied through the night-watches—thinking how cruel was the time that kept him from her. Compared with his present blank misery, those waiting days had been a miracle of happiness. He began to feel a kind of indignation against her. She had no right to mock him, to deceive him, as she had done on Monday, by a hollow show of friendly greeting. Was she afraid he thought that all was right between them—that he meant to offer no apology? He determined, with all the force of his will, that he would that very night end this horrible suspense, compel her to listen to him whilst he humbled himself before her.

After making that resolution, he grew stronger. He felt that he was a man, and that no noble-minded woman would turn away from a sincere penitent.

At least she should not misjudge him : she should know now what full justice he did her in his thoughts ; he owned it to himself to let her hear that. Meanwhile, he would bide his time. She was intending him to see that she thought he had no right to speak to her : he allowed the justice of the sentence, for the present.

Mr. Westmorland talked of the Women's Sanitary League and of Tom Saxon, and Hope told how he had faithfully and continually written to her all through her illness, but she was afraid she was now being gradually supplanted by the beautiful young daughter of a Scotch earl near whom they were staying in the Highlands. They talked, too, of the brilliant offer made to Richard Forde by Dr. Compton, of coming to London to be associated with himself, with a prospect of many glories in the future ; and how the good folk of Norchester were so indignant at his loss that they had presented him with a magnificent testimonial, bitterly as, a year ago, they had resented his "new-fangled innovations." But now the ancient borough was become scientific : and the streets were to be lighted by electricity.

Snatches of the talk he caught, while Lady Caro-

line, to whom Norchester gossip was uninteresting, prattled of other things ; and it seemed as though the dinner were over before it had well begun, and they were repairing to the drawing-room again.

When coffee had been served, Mr. Westmorland begged Lady Caroline to play to him, and she gladly consented. Evelyn followed her down the long room, opened the grand piano and lit the candles.

For a few minutes he remained standing beside her, forming his resolve as he listened to the gush of stormy music which her hands evoked from the keys.

His eyes were full upon Hope, as she sat in the lamplight ; and it was as if her cold, unbending aspect, and her remote queenliness, sent a new strange, throbbing life through him. He was determined to make her hear him ; and, leaving the piano, he walked straight up to her.

It seemed as though the simple act discomposed her : she shrank a little back, holding her head higher, looking as though she would say,

“What can you want with me?”

“Will you come and see the dogs?” he asked, in a voice meant to reach his father’s ear ; and he added lower, “I must speak to you, alone.”

She looked at him, or rather past him, coldly.

“I do not understand you,” she said.

“All I ask is to be allowed to explain. You will not give me an opportunity. I must make one.”

He paused. “God only knows what will become of me if you oblige me to part from you, unforgiven.”

She rose slowly, and said,

“I will go with you ;” but the quiet, unemotional, polite bearing seemed to argue no prospect of his being met half-way in his delicate task.

They went out of the room together, not unmarked by Lady Caroline, who continued to play softly.

The hall was mostly in fire-light, only one lamp was lit, near the hearth.

The warm radiance of the glowing logs shone far out upon the dark floor, where most of the dogs, being excluded from the drawing-room, had betaken themselves to sleep.

Evelyn walked towards the fire, and moved forward a low chair.

"Sit down, please; you are not strong yet," he pleaded.

"I will stand, thank you; what you have to say cannot take long, and we shall be missed from the drawing-room. I am quite strong."

Strong! Yes, indeed. Cruelly strong he felt her to be. She stood up, in her maiden pride, so calm, so unmoved, so sure of herself, that the sight of her well-nigh maddened him. Now—now he must speak; he had made this occasion for which he so longed, and come what might he would use it. Had he any right to expect a more encouraging reception?

Across the dark iron bar of silence which divided them, he spoke.

"I want to tell you . . . to say . . . you must know what I want to say. The words have burned in me ever since I knew—since I found out . . . since I saw Disney." His chest heaved. "If you knew," he said, with breathless haste, lest his voice should fail him before the end, "how I have suffered . . . hated myself . . . repented! How the longing to tell you has shaken me till sometimes it seemed too much to bear . . . and then they said you were dying! . . . If I could make you understand what it was to see your face again—to feel there was a chance of telling you what I felt. You think I should not dare to hope you could forgive? Perhaps not. . . I am at your mercy. If you have no forgiveness for me, you will at least know how I have repented."

He covered his face with his hands.

She did not stir: after a pause he looked down upon her drooped lids. She had joined her hands tightly together, otherwise there was no sign of feeling about her,

"You taught me a lesson, which I needed," she gravely said at last, still with her eyes down. "Nobody, till I met you, had ever openly disapproved of me; at least, not to the extent of declining my acquaintance. I suppose I ought to consider you a useful factor in my education."

"Your bitterness is quite pardonable. I will bear all your sneers," he said, in tones of such pain as smote the girl's tender heart.

In an impulse of generosity she held out her hand.

"Please don't think of it again," she said. "I forgave you the day you were so kind to me on Limerdale. I am sorry you should have had this suffering to bear, in—in addition to your—your other trouble."

"My other trouble!" he repeated, blankly. "Oh, my father's illness!"

She silently withdrew her hand.

"You really forgive me?" he said, as though the fact scarcely brought him that extreme beatification he had expected. "Me, who, without knowing a single fact of the case, insolently set up myself in judgment against you! And who insulted you so brutally when you were willing to be friends. You forgive too easily."

"Oh, you make too much of it," she said with an air of wishing to have done with these self-accusing reminiscences. "Your motive, at least, was good, you know: you could not pretend to be civil to a person you so reprobated. Now—I have given you plenary absolution. Shall we go back to the drawing-room?"

Was it over? Apparently.

She had determined to cut him short: had even refused to sit down: had, in fact, behaved as though he and his shortcomings were matters of so little importance to her that it was hardly worth while to trouble her with them.

What more had he expected? He could not say: he only knew that his present agony seemed greater

than he could bear. He moved before her, as she turned to go.

"I have yet to ask your forgiveness," he said harshly, "for troubling you concerning such a trivial matter as myself. I am too despicable, I see, for you even to consider seriously. I am the wretched man who engaged himself to a woman he did not love, and yet presumed to criticise you for dismissing—oh, forgive me! I hardly know what I say. You are kinder to me than I deserve. Good-bye. I will not intrude my feelings upon you again. Good-bye!"

She paused, and listened, petrified, to this outburst. There was such a fierce undercurrent of wild passion in his voice, the accents seemed to shake her like a strong wind.

"I am sorry to have seemed discourteous," she said, a little tremulously.

"I think I am mad," he said; "but God knows what it is to live alone, as I do, with every feeling stifled close, without sympathy, without companionship, without an aim in life to keep me from stagnation! I feel as if—as if——" his voice died away. It seemed as if something he would have said was violently repressed. "It is not for me to trouble you with this," he said at last, in his old patient voice, somewhat sadder than usual. "If I feel your presence on my hearth so strongly that I forget myself, you must forgive that too. God bless you . . . Are you not going, now?"

She wavered. A sudden light of womanly sympathy glowed in her face. She looked up at him.

"Major Westmorland . . . if you want sympathy . . . if you think I could help you . . . I should like to. You mistake a little—I am far from despising you. I will listen——"

"No," he murmured. "I dare not! We mean such different things, you and I. You would give me your sweet pity as you would give it to any unfortunate thing you happened to meet: and I should—fling it in your face!"

She started back from him.

“Do you think I will be pitied by you?” he said, with rising passion. “I, who have loved you almost from the moment I first saw you—who tried to hate you because I loved you so wildly—who dared not take your little hand in mine lest that should prove too much for my self-control—who think of you all day and night, whose whole soul is so full of you that nothing else in the world seems definitely real—do you think I will take your pity?”

She stood astounded, her wide gaze fixed upon his agitated face as if with a fascination too strong for resistance. Her silence was the spur that urged him on.

“I never loved before,” he continued, with most unusual rapidity of utterance, “I did not know the force of it when I asked that poor child to marry me—I thought that I could kill it . . . could kill my love for you! You see how successful I have been—how I have gained the mastery over it! Hope!” suddenly he gasped, “what is it? You are ill—it is my fault! My intolerable selfishness! I forgot how weak she is!”

She had saved herself from falling, by dropping into the chair she had declined to use.

He sprang to a table near, seized his father’s vinaigrette, and held it to her. She seemed not to notice it, nor him. Her hands covered her face.

He dropped to his knees beside her; the mingled force of love and regret moved him as he had never been moved before.

“What have I done?” he pleaded, in a voice so tender, so rich and full in utterance, that it might not have been his own. “Hope, my queen, my first and last love, speak to me! I will be good! I will not disturb, nor distress you again! I am so sorry, so ashamed of my own want of self-restraint. I cried out to you like a drowning wretch; I will be silent now.”

She did not move; at last he lost patience, and drew her hands away gently from her face.

It was a different countenance from the set and haughty one which had fronted him during the foregoing interview. Alive with emotion, scarlet, quivering with feeling, drooping under his gaze,

"Oh, let me go!" she gasped at last.

"I am not holding you," he replied, unsteadily.

"Go, if you will."

And then at last the great swelling wave of feeling broke at her feet; he forgot all circumstances, all his own deficiencies, all but the one mighty desire of his lonely heart, and, simply because he could not help it, he cried out to her:

"Will you leave me here alone—without you, Hope, my Hope? Oh, Hope, stay with me! Come to me! Be my own! I love—I love you so!"

His arm was on the arm of her chair, and he dropped his head upon it: his great shoulders shook with one deep sob.

At last her low voice roused him.

"You loved me—that night—in the garden?"

"With all my soul, though then I hardly understood."

"Why did you engage yourself to Leo?"

"Partly to protect myself against your power over me; partly to please my father; it was a grossly wrong action, yet at the time my only desire was to do right. What must have been your opinion of me? Oh, God," he passionately cried, "that you and I were back, in the darkness and rain, together on the lonely moor! Nobody to come between us then! For that one day of my life I lived indeed!"

He raised his face, with tear-brimmed eyes, to hers; and what he saw there sent the blood to his heart with so sudden a rush that his senses reeled. For one long, glorious instant his eyes seemed burning into hers, the next she was in his arms.

He drew her, strongly, yet with infinite tenderness, into his embrace; he laid his brown cheek against her damask one; at last his lips trembled upon hers, and then the world faded out of sight for a time.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CURSE FAILS.

For love's own voice has owned her love is mine ;
 And love's own palm has pressed my palm to hers ;
 Love's own deep eyes have looked the love she spoke,
 And love's young heart to mine was fondly beating,
 As from her lips I sucked the sweet of life.

THOMAS WOOLNER.

"You know," he said at last. "I cannot let you go."

"Oh !" she cried, her sweet face hidden against his neck, "what have you done? You have taken me unawares ! You took advantage of my weakness !"

"Yes," he said, defiantly, yet in a voice half strangled with an emotion too mighty for restraint, "I have ! It was my only chance. . . . You have been so terribly strong—too strong for me. Now is my hour. Thank God I have taken it. You are mine, whether you own it or not. None shall take you away from me."

"You do not know—I have not said I love you," she cried, rebelling fruitlessly against this newly-manifested strength and mastery.

He held her away from him, and looked at her, his eyes kindled, his breath quick, his whole air that of one who has fought against terrible odds, and at the end, to his unspeakable surprise and joy, finds himself conqueror.

"I saw your eyes," he said. "They told me. It was not pity merely, nor womanly sympathy : it was love ; and you are mine. Thank God."

He bent his head reverently ; she clasped her small hands over his : he could feel their trembling.

"Have you loved me so long?" she asked.

"All my life, it seems."

"You are honest and good," she said, impetuously, nestling to his side, half-shy, half-trustful. "You never did a mean thing, nor thought a mean thought. I trust you so."

"Oh, my beloved !"

Later on, when they were calmer, she said,

"You were right to think I had done wrong. It was true—I think I did treat Edgar badly. If I really had loved him, I suppose I should have forgiven him. And yet—I cannot fancy myself capable of loving a man who could do such a thing."

"Yet you can love a man who engaged himself to a girl for whom he cared nothing?"

She looked at him gravely.

"You never deceived her. You never pretended to care for her. She says so herself."

"I meant to do my duty to her," he said "arrogant fool that I was. I am so thankful she took her happiness into her own hands. Disney is a good fellow at the bottom ; he will settle down and make her very happy."

"I think so too," said Hope, softly.

"If you could know," he confessed, presently, "from what a state of despondency—almost despair—you aroused me the other day, when I overtook you in the lane ; you did not know you were so near me when you came to this part of the country ?"

"No, indeed. I had no clear idea of the whereabouts of Feverell."

"I was utterly wretched that day," he said. "My father had almost impressed me with his own superstition. I am the worst fellow in the world to live with a hypochondriac—my spirits are not high enough. You know my father believes that our race is to become extinct next year?"

She had heard no more of it than what Gilbert Greville had told her. Evelyn explained to her the curious origin of his father's monomania.

"I really do think it very strange," she said, "I

mean, it is a curious coincidence that you should be the only son of a younger son, just when the moon is on Sunday, the first of March."

The sound of the brougham wheels on the gravel first brought back their minds to every-day life. Evelyn started.

"It cannot be time for you to go," he cried. "Ah! but now it is different. When I said farewell to you in the charcoal-burner's hut, I intended never to see you again as long as I lived. But now! Oh, my sweet, my own love, soon we shall not have to say good-bye any more."

She rose from the chair, and stood up stately in the firelight, which flung rosy lights over her soft, sweeping draperies. He felt as if the strength of his overwhelming happiness must kill him as he devoured her with his eyes.

"It is you—really you," he said. "You stand here, in my house, as I have so often, so often fancied you. Is it true? Hope, do you not repent? Do you hold to your word? Ah! You have given me no promise yet!"

He approached, and drew her into his proud arms.

"Will you be my—wife? My wife," he repeated, as if he could not often enough taste the sweetness of the dear words; and in her captor's strong hold, and with his eyes compelling her, no other course seemed open to the victim than to say,

"I will."

"May I tell him—my father—to-night?" he pleaded.

She turned her small face up to his, and a little smile dawned on the tempting mouth.

"Ah! You are marrying in obedience to his wishes," she said, softly, "and engaging yourself as a matter of duty. Evelyn! Dear love!" in sudden consternation, as a look of intense pain passed over his face. "Forgive me! My attempt at a joke was in extremely bad taste!"

"It is only that I hate to be reminded of it," he

faltered, shamefacedly. "Don't say that I never did anything mean!"

"It was not mean; you mistook your own feelings, that was all."

"Yes, I had not proved love. I did not know what this was then," and he drew her closer to his side.

They entered the drawing-room together.

Lady Caroline, though sedulously entertained by her host, was beginning to desire the reappearance of her charge; for the theme that he had chosen to discourse upon was the ruling passion of his mind—the approaching Doom of the Westmorlands. The old missal, in which the prophecy had originally been found, was always close at his elbow, and he showed it to her.

Taken in conjunction with the feudal aspect of all around her, and the intense conviction of the old man himself, the weird legend somewhat impressed the imaginative mind of the lady, and she was feeling decidedly uncomfortable when the door opened, and the missing pair walked in.

One glance at their faces told their tale to her, at least; and it was more or less a shock.

We who read, knowing as Jane Austen remarks, by the few pages which remain, that the climax must be reached, are able to take it more quietly. Lady Caroline, assisted by no such token, thought that it was quick work; but then she had not heard the preceding volumes of the romance. Evelyn's voice had the ring of his completed manhood in it, as he said,

"Father, Hope has promised to be my wife;" and the girl, slipping to her knees on the rug beside him, put her arms about the old man's neck, and, breaking into tears, faltered out,

"I am not good enough for him! I have been selfish and frivolous, while he—you know what he is—you know! . . . But I love him so!"

No fit nor paralytic seizure followed this second announcement. The old man sat dazed for a moment,

and then stretched out tremulous hands to the Major.

"My son! My son!"

Evelyn gave his hand in a silence too full for words.

... "So it was this—always this? Eh, my boy?" cried the father tremulously.

"Always this, father... but I scarcely dared to hope."

"My daughter," tenderly resumed the invalid, caressing the girl's head, hidden in his shoulder.

"I will be your daughter—I will try to be worthy of him: to be always with him ought to make me good!"

The paternal love, which had seemed non-existent in Clifford Westmorland's heart, gushed out at length, as if stimulated by those sweet words.

"If he is as good a husband to you as he has been a good son to me, my dear, you will be a happy woman... and I expect you will—perhaps—not make his duty so hard as I have done."

It seemed to Evelyn as if his great simple heart must burst, for joy of those words.

Lady Caroline, with wet eyes, came forward to offer her congratulations.

"Is the Curse averted?" she asked, with tender playfulness.

"It only says 'Withouten Hope,'" said Evelyn, triumphantly: "and Hope is mine now."

"Evelyn—that is brilliant of you! It never occurred to me!" cried his father, admiringly.

It occurred to me very shortly after I met her," replied his son.

"Well! Then the Sunday Moon is powerless now," said Lady Caroline. "Let me see—what day does it fall upon, according to the modern calendar?"

Evelyn looked puzzled, and said,

"The first of March."

"Ah! but not our first of March, surely. This prophecy is fourteenth century, I think you say?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Well—then their March began somewhere about

the middle of ours, did it not? Somewhere about the Ides of our present March? Old May Day was our fifteenth of May, you know."

"Father," said Evelyn, after a long pause, "did you take into consideration the difference in the almanac?"

"No, Evelyn," hesitatingly replied the old man, who had flushed crimson, I cannot say that I did. I certainly never thought of it. Perhaps I should have showed the document more publicly; some one should have discovered so glaring an error. I cannot think how I came to——"

"Then, after all, the prophecy does not apply this year," cried Evelyn. "If there's a new moon on the first, there manifestly can't be another for four weeks, without a convulsion of nature."

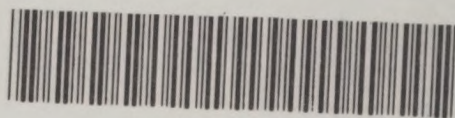
"Manifestly."

"Lady Caroline, fair soothsayer, you have broken the spell!" cried the Major, as his rare, deep laugh rang out from his great sound lungs. "We must wait until the new moon makes her appearance on the Ides of March before we expect our doom. Father, father, genuine though it be, your curse has failed ignominiously, just as there was always a cheat in the oracles of old."

"The Curse spoke truly," maintained the old man, obstinately. "The technical differences in dates are what it would not concern itself about. It is you who have successfully evaded it. 'Withouten Hope,' it marvellously said; and Hope is yours now!"

THE END.

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